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Why Los Angeles Spanish Matters

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ABSTRACT

The importance of Spanish as a world language has increased steadily in the United States. Little recognition, however, has been given to the dialect that is spoken natively by individuals born in cities such as Los Angeles. Like African American Vernacular English, Los Angeles Spanish is a non-standard oral dialect that is used mainly in informal contexts and is not taught in schools. This paper suggests that a closer examination of the origins and functions of the Los Angeles Spanish dialect could help to illuminate the social and linguistic situation in the aforementioned city.

KEYWORDS: *Los Angeles Spanish, vernacular, non-standard dialect, koiné, Spanglish*

Walk down just about any street in Los Angeles and you will hear Spanish. The quantity will, of course, vary according to the neighborhood. However, the fact remains that Spanish is heard nearly everywhere. For those who have grown up in Los Angeles, this is relatively unsurprising and fails to attract their attention. If one asks who these Spanish speakers are, the answer seems relatively clear given the city's proximity to Mexico as well as its status as a center of immigration: these are recently arrived immigrants. The common belief is that these individuals cannot be immigrants who have lived in the area for a long time because they would have already learned English and abandoned their Spanish a while ago. In the U.S., we have been told, Spanish is a heritage language that would rapidly die out after just a few generations were it not for the constant arrivals of recent immigrants. A closer look at the situation, however, indicates that, on the contrary, Spanish in Los Angeles is not only persisting but thriving. Evidence from this affirmation stems from research done at UCLA on the Spanish spoken in this region.

To the untrained ear, Spanish is Spanish. Yes, there may be some differences like that funny lisp they have in Spain or variation in vocabulary, discrepancies like *carro* and *coche*, but the rest is all the same, right?

Actually, it is not. As most students of linguistics know, there are considerable differences that exist between different dialects of Spanish. Of course, these are more obvious if one compares Spanish from Spain with Spanish from Latin America, but even within Latin America significant variation is evident. In fact, dialects in Latin America have traditionally been classified into two major groups: those from the coastal regions, called *tierras bajas* dialects, and those from the interior, referred to as *tierras altas* dialects (Wagner 55; Menéndez Pidal 142). In general terms, *tierras bajas* dialects display a lot of variation with respect to the pronunciation of consonants while *tierras altas* dialects tend to conserve the pronunciation of consonants as is.

Many people, linguists included, believe that the Spanish spoken in this region is poor Spanish that is really more English than Spanish. Natives of Los Angeles who learned Spanish in said city are often told that their speech is uneducated and incorrect and that what they speak is not Spanish but rather *pocho* or Spanglish. This is the message they hear from teachers, parents, grandparents and other family members in California as well as abroad. This situation has led to the belief that Los Angeles Spanish is corrupt Spanish—something to be eradicated or corrected rather than preserved. Research done at UCLA, however, provides an alternative perspective. A thorough inquiry as to the origins of this variety, as well as a dissection of its component parts and an in-depth examination of the contexts in which it is used today, all indicate that Los Angeles Spanish is not poor Spanish but rather a completely different dialect.

By analyzing its phonological and lexical features, as well as taking into consideration the history of the region, we find that this dialect is based on Mexican Spanish. It is not, however, the same. The most convincing evidence for this claim is found when one compares not the pronunciation or the vocabulary of the two groups (although these do exhibit subtle differences), but when one looks at the evaluations that the speakers assign to certain linguistic features, such as the stigmatization of the pronoun *vos*. Unlike the pronunciation or vocabulary differences, which are mainly due to outside influences, i.e. English, arguments based on evaluation differences provide strong, nearly incontrovertible evidence that this is another dialect of Spanish, as opposed to a loss thereof.

The evidence, however, does not end here. Los Angeles Spanish, as readers may have guessed, is not the average Spanish dialect. It is actually

a koiné, a compromise dialect that arises from contact between several related varieties (Parodi 1999b: 922, 2003: 31, 2009b: 49; 2010b: 6). Typically originating in centers of immigration such as LA, koinés are usually the result of accommodation, which Giles and Powesland (1997) describe as a phenomenon in which one speaker modifies his speech to approximate that of his interlocutor in order to gain social approval (233). Koinés are usually characterized by the following features: leveling, in which marked forms are reduced or eliminated in favor of those used by the majority (either in terms of numbers, prestige or both) and simplification, which involves an increase in the regularity of forms.

Until relatively recently the majority of the Spanish-speaking immigrants settling in Los Angeles were Mexicans. In the late 1970's and 1980's, however, Chinchilla, Hamilton and Loucky (1993) state that large waves of Central Americans arrived in LA due to the civil unrest in those countries at the time (53). Linguistically, this proved to be an interesting development because, as established earlier, Los Angeles Spanish is a *tierras altas* dialect, while the incoming Central American Spanish, particularly that of El Salvador, the country that has contributed the most immigrants after Mexico, is classified as a *tierras bajas* dialect. As was mentioned before, when Salvadoran and other Central American Spanish speakers come into contact with Los Angeles Spanish, they end up accommodating their speech to the *tierras altas* dialect spoken there. The differences that speakers of Central American Spanish exhibit with respect to Spanish-speaking Angelenos are also evident in vocabulary and forms of address. Central Americans use an additional form called vos 'you (singular, informal),' while LA Spanish speakers do not. Their adaptation to the Spanish of Los Angeles is most noticeable in their vocabulary, as we see in the following substitutions: *chamarra/chaqueta* for *chumpa* 'jacket' or *mamila/biberón* for *pacha* 'baby bottle'. In fact, when most of these adults return to their countries of origin, they are teased and made fun of because they no longer sound like native speakers of those countries.

Even more remarkable is what happens, linguistically, with the second generation of these Central American immigrants. As Parodi has observed, the children of Salvadoran and other Central American immigrants who are born and raised here in LA acquire LA Spanish as their native dialect. In a study examining knowledge of Salvadoran vocabulary, for example, she reports that first generation immigrants understood 100% of the words, while members of the second generation

only understood 60% (Parodi 2010b: 12). In the case of *voseo*, the use of *vos* and its corresponding verb forms, Parodi explains that it is only used by those born in Central America (Parodi 2010b: 13). Although their children recognize and understand this form, they themselves do not use *vos* in Los Angeles and often have a negative opinion of it. Some may try using *voseo* during visits to Central America, but they tend to lack the knowledge necessary to do so appropriately.

The observation that these children acquire Los Angeles Spanish rather than their parents' Central American dialects provides yet more evidence to support the analysis of Los Angeles Spanish as a dialect in its own right. Linguistic research has consistently shown that the acquisition of a first language/dialect is a rather remarkable process that tends to fill in the linguistic blanks that may exist in the language a child is learning (Pinker 2007: 21; Guasti 2004: 16). As a result, the linguistic variety that is acquired cannot be considered deficient in any way. Since it is claimed that Los Angeles Spanish is learned as a native dialect, it can be no exception.

As mentioned previously, further evidence that Los Angeles Spanish is a separate dialect as opposed to *poor* Spanish emerges when we gain a better understanding of how this variety is used and transmitted. A close look at the linguistic situation in Los Angeles reveals some interesting facts. Although it is clear that both Spanish and English are spoken in this city, the details regarding their use reveal a rather unbalanced situation which is called diglossia. A diglossic situation arises when two or more languages are spoken in the same place, Language A, which has greater prestige and is used in formal contexts, and Language B, which enjoys less prestige and is relegated to familiar domains such as the home. Moreover, Language A is the one that is taught in schools and used for all official matters. In the situation at hand, there is no doubt that English serves as Language A and Spanish as Language B. Recalling that there is more than one dialect of Spanish spoken in Los Angeles, it is important to mention that diglossia is also found between dialects of Spanish. Among members of the working class, Los Angeles Spanish serves as the more prestigious Dialect A, and Central American Spanish (or any dialect other than Los Angeles Spanish) plays the role of the lesser used Dialect B (Parodi 2009b: 60).

Turning back to the situation between English and Spanish, one might argue that, in spite of its language B status, Spanish is taught in the schools. Although this is true, it is necessary to ask, 'What KIND of

Spanish is being taught?’ Is it Los Angeles Spanish, which accepts the use of *carpeta* for carpet and permits the use of forms such as *vistes* and *téngamos* (cf. *viste* ‘you saw’ and *tengamos* ‘we have (subjunctive mood)’) or is it the standard Mexican Spanish that calls such speech **INCORRECT** and **UNEDUCATED**? Thinking back to the Spanish taught in high school, any native Angeleno can tell you that it is the latter. Acknowledging this situation—that the Spanish spoken in Los Angeles is not taught in the schools—goes a long way towards understanding many of the problems that speakers of Los Angeles Spanish encounter. This is not a standard dialect. Not only that, but it is only transmitted orally. Being bilingual, its speakers can read and write in English, but, lacking formal instruction in Spanish means that they have no experience in reading and writing their native language. When one considers all of the differences that exist between oral and written language, it becomes clear that this omission in one’s linguistic education has significant repercussions. Much of the knowledge that comprises our linguistic and social competence is actually acquired in school. Take, for instance, the formality distinction between the two forms of address, *tú* and *usted*, in Spanish. Although one may think that the use of the more formal *usted* and its corresponding forms is intrinsic to the language, this is only true in the case of standard dialects that are taught in school. It does not form part of the knowledge of the non-standard oral dialect speaker. Thus, speakers of a non-standard oral dialect such as Los Angeles Spanish cannot and should not be expected to produce the *usted* form in the appropriate contexts without formal instruction. This would be the equivalent of expecting a child to be born knowing in which contexts they should use *can* and in which situations it is more appropriate to use *may*. It is simply unreasonable and unnatural. Clearly, any high school Spanish teacher or administrator that is equipped with this knowledge will be much better prepared to address the needs of these Los Angeles Spanish speakers.

Understanding what the differences between Los Angeles Spanish and Mexican Spanish (either standard or rural) are, both in terms of linguistic content and of use, can clear up a lot of misconceptions regarding not only LA Spanish, but also those individuals who speak it. Comments are frequently made that these individuals are lazy, stupid and rude because they don’t speak proper Spanish. The existence of Los Angeles Spanish, however, indicates that none of these statements are true. Acknowledging the fact that these people speak a completely different

dialect than the standard Spanish frees them from having to live up to this unreasonable standard. It has the potential to wipe the slate clean, so to say, and reject the notion of any inferiority, linguistic or otherwise.

In conclusion, the existence of this dialect provides living proof that Spanish is important in Los Angeles—so important that rather than abandoning it once they learn English, Spanish speakers continue to use it. Not only do they maintain it but they also adapt it to the variety spoken there—a definite indication that it continues to be of use to them. If they did not need it, why would they bother to change it? This continued growth and adaptation demonstrates to us that it is far from dying out and, moreover, continues to be a relevant resource for the Latinos in Los Angeles.

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