

## *Spanish: The Foreign National Language*

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CARLOS J. ALONSO

An issue that currently dominates discussions in and about foreign language departments in higher education in the United States concerns the explosive growth of enrollments in Spanish courses, a situation that has become synthesized in a catchy acronym used widely now to encompass the other foreign languages: LOTS (languages other than Spanish). Whether Spanish on your campus is a separate department or ensconced within a larger unit such as Romance languages or modern languages and literatures, its disproportionate size with respect to the other foreign languages is a reality with which we all have to contend. The urgency surrounding the topic is exacerbated by the larger circumstance of the increasingly tenuous place that foreign languages have come to occupy in the humanities curriculum.

According to the latest figures compiled by the MLA, almost fifty-four percent of all foreign language enrollments in 2002 were in Spanish (Welles), which means, of course, that there are more students matriculated in that language than in all the other foreign languages combined. This situation is difficult for all parties involved: on the one hand, Spanish departments or sections feel that they are not being allotted the resources that should be theirs by dint of their extraordinary size. In fact, most departments of Spanish are attempting to come to terms with their new situation in a number of creative ways: inquiring into what their mission is and how they can best accomplish it, finding ways to share their

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bonanza with other language programs (Nichols), or seceding from the larger departmental units of which they have been part historically. Another sign of this inward look is the number of essays and anthologies that have appeared in recent years that examine Hispanism as an epistemological and institutional construct (Gabilondo; Mariscal; Moreiras; Resina). On the other hand, the remaining foreign languages feel that their own funding is continually threatened by the inordinate enrollment levels of Spanish and the recurring decreases in the number of students who matriculate in their courses. Spurred by their concern, they, too, have engaged in a refashioning of their curricula and offerings and have sought options for dealing with the Spanish juggernaut.

As you probably know, the ADFL hosts a discussion forum for chairs of departments of foreign languages that is a good place to take the pulse of our professional concerns. In May 2005, the forum included a message, which I paraphrase here, from an obviously concerned colleague that echoed this plight:

I am co-chair of a department of languages and literatures at a small liberal arts college where both Spanish and ASL enrollments are soaring. Since our institution is not well endowed, opening new full-time tenure-track positions invariably favors one department at the expense of another. Therefore, managing enrollments in both Spanish and ASL has become a significant challenge. Moreover, there is increasing concern among those of us teaching French, German, or Japanese regarding student numbers, numbers that can be dreadfully low. Hence we are considering limiting Spanish enrollment, and I would like to know if some colleagues, or departments, have been evaluating similar measures and whether some have enforced such a rule already. I would welcome your collective wisdom in trying to address a challenge that is not likely to disappear.

It is perhaps a measure of the urgency with which the growth of Spanish has come to be regarded that this request for help and information resulted in one of the most extensive and lively exchanges in recent memory. One response recorded was instructive precisely because of the way in which it purported to solve the problem represented by large enrollments in Spanish. I paraphrase:

As chair of a department that teaches several foreign languages, I place a cap not only on Spanish but also on ASL. I do not consider recruiting additional faculty members to offer more sections of Spanish and ASL until the elementary-level sections of all the other languages are full.

Presenting ASL and Spanish as a troublesome pair shows that the writer is not anti-Spanish but is instead considering the situation strictly in

pragmatic terms. As a solution to the widely uneven distribution of enrollments, the system detailed in this response may be inelegant, but it has the virtue of being brutally effective. More important, the practice it describes reveals the place to which the existence of a foreign language requirement (or, where it does not exist, of the expectation that a well-rounded education should include knowledge of another language) has led our collective endeavor. For the author of this message is clearly acting on the conviction that enrollments in foreign language courses are a zero-sum game in which a student's decision to take on one language necessarily represents a loss to another language. In such a situation, the almost irresistible solution is to narrow the choices students may have in the exercise of their options in order to achieve a more even distribution of enrollments across the various languages.

The catch, of course, is that as much as one may understand this plight, the simple solution of preventing students from matriculating in Spanish language courses will be interpreted as a high-handed attempt to push them toward unappealing courses and will only result in their disgruntlement and frustration. A workable solution to the pressure exerted by the disproportionate numbers of students taking Spanish courses must acknowledge and accommodate the student interest that drives those numbers, while enhancing the existence and growth of the languages other than Spanish in the university. Arriving at this solution is, clearly, a tall order, since the strictures of a zero-sum game are inimical to the concurrent expectation on the part of students that they be free to follow their own bliss when it comes to choosing a particular language or course of study.

The foregoing anecdote makes explicit one of the points that I would like to underscore: if there is increased anxiety in the other foreign language departments about how to deal with the Spanish boom, it is because Spanish has spilled out of the bounds of the category that encompasses foreign languages in North American academia. In fact, I would argue that the key issue that departments of Spanish are currently facing is their change in status from a department of foreign language to something resembling a department of a second national language and culture in this country.

Indeed, the rise of enrollments in Spanish is fueled by students' perception that Spanish is not just another foreign language, that they need to master it for reasons that transcend the foreign language label. Relevant statistics begin to outline the shape of that sense. In the 2000 census, close to one of every seven persons in the United States identified himself or herself as Hispanic. Between 1990 and 2000 the Hispanic population grew by 58%. In 2000–04, the Hispanic population growth accounted for

almost 50% of the population growth in the entire country. In 2003 the Bureau of the Census made the stunning announcement that Hispanics had overtaken blacks as the largest racial-ethnic minority in the United States. That same office projected that by 2050 one-quarter of the population in the United States will be Hispanic. But statistics are only the base reality of the much larger reaccommodation that will be dictated by them. In the Fall 2004 issue of the *ADFL Bulletin*, Reed Way Dasenbrock placed the new status of Spanish in a forward-looking comment that is breathtaking in its implications:

Whatever comes of the present moment, it seems to me that the primary dynamic in American society and culture for the remainder of our lives will be the quickly changing relation between north and south—that is, between the United States and the populations of Latin American origin who live here now. . . .

. . . North is north, and south is south, and never the twain shall meet. But met they have, and it is now impossible—no matter how hard the INS tries—to keep them separate. That North America is now part of Latin America is a development that has spawned a legal, political, and social backlash. Few literature professors agree with that backlash—we deplore the excesses of the INS, support amnesties for illegal immigrants, are indignant at the human rights abuses represented by our immigration policies, and advocate support for bilingual education. Yet when we turn from those social issues to professional issues, which are much more clearly under our control, we act in a manner not so different from those whose social policies we deplore. We work with a rigid sense of English studies as one thing and Spanish studies as another, which reflects and reinforces the division between North and Latin America in our society. The way we structure the study of literature along linguistic lines strengthens rather than complicates or breaks down this mental structure. We may deplore the activity of the INS, *la migra*, but we too have a *frontera* in our disciplinary landscape that divides us. We are our own INS. . . .

. . . What we have not done in the academy is to create across our disciplinary borders a comparable liminal space. Our institutional geography is bipolar. Although the world of literary and cultural expression that our discipline exists to study is as fluid as the demographics I have described, our representation of that expression is much less fluid and is bounded by older categories and conceptual expressions that in social life we tend to deplore. We therefore need to create a new institutional geography that is adequate to represent the cultural geography of the world we inhabit. (24)

Dasenbrock's comments point in broad terms to the intellectual reconfiguration of our academic agenda that will be demanded by the presence of Hispanic culture in the United States. The institutional implications of

the new reality that he describes will require a radical refashioning of our universities and of our fields of inquiry that will encompass many years. Yet awareness of the inevitability of the transformation can help orient our current endeavors in constructive and creative ways.

I take as my point of departure an assertion that I know is polemical and perhaps even provocative but that may offer a way out of the seeming dead end to which the inordinate growth of Spanish enrollments has led us: Spanish should no longer be regarded as a foreign language in this country; and, consequently, we should undertake an institutional rethinking and reshaping of the place occupied by Spanish language and culture in the United States academic world. This reaccommodation must involve not just departments or sections of Spanish as they are currently constituted and as they define their mission and object of study but also all other humanities and social science departments in the academy—chief among them English, history, and foreign languages. What I am arguing for is—no more and no less—that academic institutions in the United States behave as if Spanish possessed second national language status and deal in a forthright and decisive fashion with all the ramifications that such a supposition would entail. The English-only movement may have been successful in quashing the local and state initiatives that sought to recognize the ascendance of Spanish in the United States, but academic institutions are in a position to acknowledge that fact and to advance an intellectual agenda founded on its significance. Furthermore, our gatekeeper role in the educational system will also trigger corresponding changes in the elementary, middle, and high school curricula of this country. I should stress that I am not defending the fostering of Spanish academic imperialism but arguing for the habilitation of bilingualism in general—or, what is perhaps more precise—the creation of a context that will contribute to the demise of monolingualism in this country.

Spanish is indeed no longer a foreign language in the United States; the evidence of it is everywhere. The omnipresent bilingual English-Spanish signs, the ubiquitous automated telephone option “Para español, oprima el número dos,” the direct mailings written in Spanish, the targeted telephone solicitations in that language, the wide availability of dubbed versions of films, the snippets of conversations in Spanish that we hear with increasing frequency from couples or groups passing by on the street, and so on. Anyone who has visited another country in which there are at least two official languages quickly becomes aware of being immersed in such a context right here at home. We in the United States have not yet become completely conscious that this is our reality as well, even if there is no de jure recognition of Spanish as a second official language. Likewise, the

concomitant change of status of Spanish in the academy has not become a conscious general realization with the faculty and the highest level of the administration of most universities in the United States.

I am not proposing that Spanish will anytime soon be a codominant linguistic or cultural reality in the United States. Spanish is nowadays a “foreign second language” in this country, an oxymoronic phrase that only begins to address the several and complex issues involved in its current status. In the context of the United States academy, departments of Spanish find themselves in an uncomfortable and untenable situation, having potentially, when not in actuality, the enrollments of a midsized traditional department yet being constrained in their growth and institutional relevance by their inherited designation as purveyors of a foreign language and culture.

But it is this secondariness, this mainstream-but-not-quite or not-quite-foreign nature increasingly thrust by current reality on Spanish departments, that must be theorized in all its implications in order to enter into new and meaningful conversations within our institutional milieu that will take the measure of the changes required. One can see several indications of how the category of the secondary—the departments’ being mainstream, but not quite—is key to understanding their new location. But more important, the hybrid situation of contemporary departments of Spanish (somewhere between a foreign language and a second national language) puts in check the consistency of the local-foreign divide on which the relation between departments of English and foreign languages has been and continues to be constructed. The institutionally intractable status of departments of Spanish nowadays alerts us to the subtle yet inescapable dissolution of the presuppositions that have defined the boundaries of English versus foreign languages in the United States university (see Alonso and Scullion for broader discussions of this divide). I contend that pushing to its extreme the assumption that Spanish is a second national language will help us—indeed, oblige us—to rethink the very core of what we do. As Roland Greene has presciently asked, “[W]ill the rise of Spanish finally break down the notion of ‘foreign’ language that informs academic structures of all sorts, including the MLA itself?” (1243).

What would the academic landscape look like were educational institutions to implement as fully as practical the *as if* of Spanish as a second national language? To begin with, departments of Spanish would resemble departments of English more than they would departments of foreign languages, sharing with English departments the assumption that their object of study is local and national rather than foreign; Latino studies would not be the stand-alone program or the appendage to departments

of Spanish or English that it is now, and its courses would be incorporated into the curricula of several departments; there would be a dramatic expansion of courses taught in Spanish at all levels and across the university; core curricula or distribution requirements in the university would incorporate courses, texts, and materials related to the Hispanic world; the measurement and determination of competence in Spanish would consistently approach expectations for English and be recognized and rewarded accordingly; with Spanish removed from the foreign language category—thereby taken out of the zero-sum game of foreign language enrollments—foreign language departments would experience a sharp rise in enrollments from students seeking to satisfy the language requirement still in place. (Under these conditions, begrudging Spanish the attraction that students feel toward it would be equivalent to arguing that every enrollment in an English writing or culture course takes a student away from French, German, Russian, and so forth. The foreign languages would be able to plan coherently and rationally without the distorting presence of Spanish in their midst.) There are, of course, assumptions in this scenario that are debatable or may not even represent the future realities of the academy—for instance, the assumption that departments will be the principal signposts of the academic landscape—but the increase in the relative weight of Spanish in the new arrangement would be its defining feature.

The task of getting from here to there, of making possible this transformation, will fall mostly—at least initially—on departments of Spanish, which will be required to articulate cogent strategies to assume the responsibilities demanded by their new institutional location in the university. But departments and programs of English and American studies will also be called to play an important role in this process. Given their central place in the United States academic configuration, they are best poised to signal to the larger university community the recognition of the new status of Spanish as a second national cultural reality. Lately there have been encouraging signs of a willingness to undertake this mediating role: Robert McKee Irwin recently advocated “that the field of American Studies institutionalize Spanish as its second language in order both to address the importance of the growing United States Spanish-speaking population and to ensure productive scholarly dialogue within the context of the Americas” (303). In any event, it is now an inescapable conclusion that a forthright conversation between departments of Spanish and English—a conversation that it is the responsibility of both interlocutors to initiate—is long overdue.

What avenues should departments of Spanish pursue to address what will be their novel needs and responsibilities? What strategic alliances

should they develop with departments of English (with which they will share a national status) or with other language departments (with which they share a common institutional history and foreign status)? I believe that one can find in the current and contradictory “foreign second language” circumstance of Spanish departments opportunities to rethink this new location as a means to approach asymptotically the status of second national language that lies in the future of Spanish in the United States. What follows are brief descriptions of concrete practices that will allow for the exploration of the mainstream secondariness of departments of Spanish and that can pave the way for this transformation. The items do not constitute a prescription, but as an aggregate they offer an idea of the limitless possibilities open before us.

1. Sections of Spanish in departments of Romance or modern languages should undertake a searching review of what they gain and what they lose under the existing departmental arrangement given their new situation and should keep the university administration apprised of their thinking, the conclusions reached, and their plan of action to put them into effect. I can think of strategic reasons why a Spanish section may wish to remain in the same department as French, Italian, and Portuguese or among the other modern languages, as the case may be, but nowadays those reasons should not include “because we are all languages descended from Latin” or “because we all share the status of foreign languages.” The guiding principle should be that Spanish must identify and occupy the most enabling structural situation from which to articulate its agenda as a second national language.

2. Departments of Spanish must engage in a complete reconceptualization of their curriculum that extends from language courses to advanced undergraduate and graduate seminars and that centers on the understanding that they are responsible for teaching and producing scholarship about an increasingly national cultural reality rather than a foreign one. They should seek ways to resist their role as purveyors of foreignness in the university—as representatives and performers of a cultural milieu that has its defining locus elsewhere. In other words, the privileged triad of language, national spirit, and literary text and its representation as an organic yet exotic whole to the wider university audience still informs substantively the work of most departments of foreign languages. This philological box to which foreign language departments have been relegated by their very “foreign” status in the academy must be discarded as incommensurable with the realities of a national culture department. So too must the chasm be closed that now exists between the study of language and the study of literature and culture that derives from the

philological mind-set: departments of national language and culture do not have bridge courses. The double voicedness that issues from the new situation of Spanish departments should guide a complete curricular redesign of Spanish as a field of study that posits culture, not literature, as its controlling category. Literature has been deprived of its immanent and privative nature, subsumed under the mantle of general culture, and the mechanisms of cultural construction have been linked to larger discursive strategies and formations at work in a given historical moment. Most departments of English have made this transition in the last thirty years and have become more vibrant intellectual spaces for it. That vibrancy has been purchased at the expense of uniformity of purpose and a consistent self-definition, but the comfortable desideratum that everyone in an intellectual community work with the same goal in mind has shown its impoverishing side as well.

3. Departments of Spanish must enter into a core rethinking of their location with respect not only to other departments and programs like English, history, foreign languages, Latino studies, Latin American studies, and European studies but also to perhaps less obvious disciplines like women's studies, African American studies, American studies, and postcolonial studies. The capaciousness that English departments have developed to incorporate within them the objects of study of other disciplines—and that is routinely denounced as imperialistic by some departments or as dilettantish by others—is a quality not to be decried but rather emulated by departments of Spanish in this country.

4. The rise in enrollments in the language sequence in Spanish has not led to a corresponding increase in students taking advanced seminars. As a result, Spanish departments are hiring increasing numbers of lecturers to accommodate student demand for language courses. As foreign language operations, Spanish departments can be thankful for an increase in numbers that makes them *primus inter pares* among language departments. But Spanish departments must acknowledge that larger enrollments in language courses have not translated uniformly into increased numbers in advanced seminars and majors. This is a challenge that must be addressed. Spanish majors (and foreign language majors in general) nowadays are overwhelmingly double majors: this is another index of the secondariness of Spanish, but one that has not been sufficiently analyzed or seized on by most departments. Rather than decry this circumstance, we should realize that because of that very fact, students bring to our courses a dialogic perspective that should be taken advantage of pedagogically and epistemologically and used as a springboard for the dialogue with other departments and programs described in item 3 above.

5. The hierarchies and distinctions within the Hispanic field must be rethought and exploded. This reevaluation includes undoing the typical curricular separation of Spain and Spanish America as distinct cultural entities and, conversely, dismantling the arguments for a pan-Hispanic cultural worldview that periodically rears its rhetorical head. But it also means incorporating Cataluña, the Basque country, the Cuban diaspora, and the Hispanic communities in the United States, for instance, into what is considered the province of departments of Spanish in academic circles in the United States.

6. Departments of Spanish must position themselves to displace the culture they “represent” from its putative geographic bounds in Spain or Spanish America to encompass comprehensively the presence of that cultural reality within the boundaries of the United States. Most departments of Spanish can identify a sizable Hispanic community nearby with which they can establish a meaningful relation that can then be imported into the classroom in significant and varied ways. Even if that community resides at a distance, creative uses of technologies such as radio, television, e-mail, Web radio, Web conference, and so on can bring it closer to hand. Underscoring that Hispanic culture resides here as well as in the home metropolis should lead to a corresponding rethinking of what constitutes study abroad.

Some of these proposals can be considered and implemented locally, whereas others will require a systemic nationwide agenda to become effective. But given that departments of Spanish should develop henceforth an abiding interest and investment in the national scene, developing a nationwide agenda should be enthusiastically engaged rather than delayed or resisted because of the difficulties it presents. Reflecting rigorously on the vexed and complicated nature of the status of Spanish somewhere between a foreign language department and a national culture program will help clarify the agenda. To engage in this reconceptualization of their new paradoxical status as mainstream foreigners, Spanish departments should make use of all the insights available from cultural studies, postcolonial theory, performance studies, feminism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and so on, not as fetishized paradigms but as conceptual maps to help Spanish navigate the currents of its contemporary institutional mainstream secondariness. Spanish departments must develop their own weak praxis, their own style of the minor, their own rendition of mimicry and the simulacrum and arrive at a conception of power that will promote awareness of their strength as well as of their complicity in the existing institutional arrangements. Only then will Spanish be ready to assume the role demanded of it by historical circumstance as the second national language of the United States.

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