

ESTUDIOS DE LINGÜÍSTICA APLICADA, Vol. 1, No. 1

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Long delayed, the first issue of CELE's Estudios de Lingüística Aplicada ("Studies in Applied Linguistics"), has finally appeared. Subscribe; it is superb. The journal's academic excellence, however, does not provide sufficient grounds for celebrating the historic occasion with unqualified enthusiasm. There are still some quirks to be worked out.

Estudios' many virtues make its few shortcomings all the more conspicuous. If its content were mediocre or irrelevant, for example, no one would be terribly concerned about a dozen or so missed publication deadlines. The printers' ineptness is especially appalling in a city virtually unparalleled in the number of sensationalistic daily newspapers it puts out with clockwork precision.

Twelve million Mexicans can count on their morning and evening dose of verbal idiocy whose lobotomizing effect is only equaled by newprint's arch-rival -- the boob tube. Dedicated university scholars, on the other hand, can count on nothing, and find themselves at the mercy of incompetent and untrustworthy backpassers.

The first three issues of the journal were ready over a year ago. Asked to review them for CONACYT's English language monthly, R & D Mexico, I read numbers one and two in manuscript shortly before Christmas vacation, 1980. I wrote the piece, along with a complementary article on UNAM language teaching, and got paid for it. CONACYT sent its photographers over to CELE. The articles would be published as soon as the journal came out. Unfortunately, Christmas came and went, and Santa Claus finally showed up (with only half the goodies) around Halloween. In the interim we heard a wild succession of imaginative (albeit incoherent) explanations why it would take just another few days to print Estudios.

The articles I have decided to discuss here are those originally planned for a single premiere issue and subsequently divided into what were to have been twin inaugural issues. The twin was what Santa forgot last Halloween, but we have been assured and reassured that it will be along any minute now. I shall refrain from holding my breath, and to preserve my sanity, prefer to pretend the whole printing fiasco never happened and deal with what was in the original manuscript I saw last year. At best, the dismemberment criteria had all the logic of a coin flip; and at worst, are reminiscent of some demented King Solomon solving the biblical maternity dispute with a machete.

Estudios de Lingüística Aplicada is nominally a publication of CELE. For all practical purposes, however, it represents the work being carried out within the CELE's recently created Department of Applied Linguistics. The journal has three sections: articles, reports and book reviews. The thin line between article and report is hardly worth conserving. The only clear way to distinguish one from the other is by observing that articles are preceded by abstracts in English, French, German and Spanish. Reports, on the other hand, assume universal literacy in Mexico's official language. It is not at all evident that the procedure amounts to anything more than inconsistent, multi-lingual self-indulgence. This second heads-or-tails division cannot be blamed on the printers but must be attributed to the collective efforts of the eight-member Editorial Board. I may be nitpicking since the problem is minor and easily remedied, but there is additional evidence to suggest that the authors do considerably better on their own than as Board members. As a group, they are also apparently responsible for a mercifully brief, but nonetheless much-better-left-unsaid "Introduction." This document painfully demonstrates that the number-one identity crisis of applied linguistics has proven to be just as obsessional in Mexico as anywhere else.

The question of applied versus theoretical or general linguistics was surely of monumental significance around the turn of the century when virtually all the social sciences were outgrowing their adolescent acne and demanding the rights and status of all-grown-up sciences like physics or biology.

Saussure broke the umbilical cord that had tied linguistics to the humanities ever since Aristotle had invented and segregated logic and rhetoric a couple of millenia before. By 1970, however, the issue was, if not quite dead, surely terminally ill.

Perhaps a neat theory-practice distinction can be drawn in a few disciplines. Quarks, black holes, the number of angels that can fit on the head of a pin, big bangs, and the ontological proof for the existence of God come to mind as examples of elements of theories with limited, if not negligible applicability. By contrast, the Salk vaccine, the electric can opener and the neutron bomb indisputably illustrate how science can leap from the ivory tower to the most down-to-earth, nitly-gritty concerns of you, me and future generations.

But why bother? What is the point? What does the pigeonholing really accomplish? If common sense prevailed the problem, at least as it is presented here, would be forever exiled to Freshman Composition Land, along with other classics of the genre like nature vs. nurture and the chicken vs. the egg. Why then are the best and the brightest of Mexico's linguists still at it, oblivious to the banality of the issue and unconcerned with its possibly inherent triviality? It looks as if they were after some kind of eclectic, almost-anything-goes, editorial permissiveness that would not restrict the options open to future contributors to Estudios. Fine. But it also seems that they still feel obliged to prove something to Big League Scientists like Noam Chomsky ("Look Professor, no more pimples!"). Chomsky, the only modern linguist to have become practically a household word in the U.S. (needless to say, for all the wrong reasons), once tried to spoil all the fun and profit at CELE-like institutions by expressing his skepticism about their very raison d'etre. Real, he-man, M. I. T.-type linguistics had little, if anything, he suggested, to offer language learners. To make matters worse, he has made clear his disdain for "pseudo-sciences" like sociolinguistics. Despite his courageous political activism, Chomsky the Linguist is the armchair philosopher par excellence that socially conscious scientists have criticized since Marx recommended changing the world rather than contemplating it. How come, you ask? Prof. Chomsky is a self-

proclaimed, unashamed "Neo-Kantian." If you thought that they were only to be found in Catholic seminaries ever since Hume laid the groundwork of scientific methodology in the 18th century, you are in for a surprise. Today, most linguists are not intimidated by Rationalist philosophy. But back when mini-skirts, Chubby Checker and Chomsky were the latest craze (if People magazine had existed, we would all have learned how often Noam went to the movies and if he liked cocker spaniels) a decree by linguistics' heavyweight champ could have put us all out of business.

Although the CELE staff looks silly enough fighting windmills, evoking Don Quijote is far nobler than sounding as wishy-washy and corny as the noon soap opera. They go on to talk about the "practical problems" of Mexico and Latin America. The pledge of allegiance may send shivers up our spine, but it is the cheapest of thrills when, as it does here, it remains non-committal, vague, unconvincing and as distant from specific "practical problems" as quarks or pinhead angels.

Fortunately, the rest of the articles do not confirm the worst fears of the reader of the introduction. It is particularly heartening, for example, to find that Dietrich Rall and Marcela Williamson take a firm stand in their forthright report on "The Master's Degree Program in Applied Linguistics." What could be more straightforward than to recognize that the National University had, until recently, considered foreign languages to be academically, "on the same level as gym class"?

After further describing the abysmal state of language teaching in Latin America, the authors discuss the influences that have been decisive in the development of the M. A. curriculum. We learn that Edinburgh, Besancon and "some German universities" have been key elements. Then, in what may turn out to be a stroke of genius, Williamson and Rall suggest adopting the term Sprachlehrnforschung (research on language teaching and learning) to eliminate the ambiguities generated by "the imprecise term 'applied linguistics.'"

They clarify, however, that a Sprachlehrnforschung

approach is not intended to limit research in the color of the chalk and the size of the flash cards the new French teacher should use. Their point is that at institutions like CELE pedagogical priorities should be fully understood from the outset and built into what Pit Corder identifies as the essence of applied linguistics: "problem-based activity."

Rall, head of CELE's German Department, also collaborated with his wife, Dr Marlene Rall, Associate Professor at UNAM's School of Philosophy and Literature, on "A Pedagogical Grammar of German for Spanish Speakers." Their article gives a theoretical explanation as well as a model chapter of a forthcoming book - their seventh. The work is based on a long-neglected syntactical theory called "Dependency Grammar," which postulates the verb rather than the subject-predicate unit as the nucleus of a sentence.

The Ralls' project demonstrates how DLA ideals might best be realized. A practical Mexican problem, how to teach German grammar to Spanish-speaking UNAM students, is creatively approached by recourse to a theory that had been adrift in linguistic limbo since the 1930's.

Another among the most noteworthy papers is Fernando Castañón's insightful study of certain patterned characteristics found in scientific writing. Axiomatic to this type of "text linguistics" is that learning how sentences combine to form higher units of discourse may be at least as important as learning grammatical rules. Castañón proposes three types of speech acts: argumentation, facilitation and evaluation. Then, looking at texts that "define," he demonstrates that what various authors had indiscriminately referred to as "definitions," actually can be subjected to finer distinctions, of high potential to second language learning, especially in the area of reading comprehension.

An article that provides an interesting contrast to Castañón's is Rainer Enrique Hamel's "Constitution and Analysis of Verbal Action." Hamel's work is also discourse analysis, but whereas Castañón's motion is centripetal, toward the most minute nuclei of discourse features, Hamel's momentum is centrifugal. In an attempt to reformulate and expand current theory, his descriptive model would systematically account for

all verbal action. Hamel argues that earlier landmark contributions, like those of Austin, Searle and Hymes, must now be extended to encompass variables as important as the historical and material development of a given society.

He readily admits that he has not attempted to fill in the details yet. The paper is restricted to an analysis of "level three" of the six-tiered Weltanschauung, and the author's most far-reaching claim for his rough sketch is that it establishes the proper guidelines for future research. It is an erudite and thought-provoking exploration of crucial problems on the frontier of contemporary linguistics.

A glimpse at the remaining articles illustrates the diversity of work-in-progress at CELE. Guy Leclair, visiting professor from the Sorbonne, analyzes the role played by lexical items in syntax and semantics. Professors Hoshino, Meza and Tsuchiya contrast Japanese and Spanish adjectives. Ilse Heckel quotes sources as varied as Nietzsche and Johan Huizinga to suggest how drama can be applied to language teaching; and, in a somewhat related vein, Jean Claude Fontaine examines role-playing and situation simulation as classroom activities. A clear departure from classroom-oriented research is provided in José María Díaz de León's important investigation of pathological syllable deterioration. Finally, Marilyn Chasan reports on an on-site CELE experiment comparing two methods of teaching reading comprehension.

Chasan's study constitutes an excellent prelude to Estudios' third issue, which (if we all write to Santa) will be exclusively devoted to second language reading.

Subsequent special issues will also be dedicated to specific areas of inquiry, such as methodology and course design.

Estudios de Lingüística Aplicada is not easy reading, even for the experienced English teacher with a college degree. On the other hand, it is far from inaccessible for the average MEXTESOL member, and the extra effort it may require is well worth making.

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