

**GENERAL VERSUS STANDARD SPANISH:  
ESTABLISHING EMPIRICAL NORMS  
FOR THE STUDY OF U.S. SPANISH**

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A fundamental problem with the concept of a 'Standard Spanish' lies in the fact that it does not refer to some commonly defined and broadly accepted measure such as the meter, gram, roentgen, or ohm. Rather, Standard Spanish seems to represent an empirically undefined, idealized variety of the language spoken by upper class individuals residing in the capital city of Latin American countries or Spain. Standard Spanish presents problems, then, for the study of U.S. Spanish, in the sense that there are multiple standards that can serve for analyzing the features encountered in the varieties of the language spoken in this country. The origins of the political nature of Standard Spanish and the resulting implications for the study of U.S. Spanish are discussed in this study. An alternative offered here is 'General Spanish', which seeks to employ empirically based norms found throughout the Spanish-speaking world. This work does not seek to establish norms in areas such as semantics, pragmatics, and phonology; a General Spanish must avoid the attempt to impose uniformity on those areas demonstrating commonly studied linguistic variation. However, that which does remain stable throughout the Spanish-speaking world consists of the language's grammatical morphemes and syntactic structures. Thus, in working toward a definition of a grammar of General Spanish I specifically refer to those grammaticized elements of the language, presented in a reference grammar in the tradition of Nebrija. While a detailed treatment of a General Spanish falls outside the limits of this article, a preliminary presentation of an approach to establishing one is offered. Finally, it is suggested that a solution to move beyond the analytical bias created by the notion of a Standard Spanish lies in re-thinking the metalanguage utilized in the study of U.S. Spanish, and employing terminology that carries less political, ideological, and semantic baggage.

### Introduction

Studies of U.S. Spanish (USSp) often refer to the 'non-standard' features found in the varieties spoken in this country. However, a fundamental problem with the term 'standard' lies in the fact that it does not refer to some commonly defined and broadly accepted measure such as the meter, gram, roentgen or ohm (Villa 1996). Rather, 'Standard Spanish' (SS) seems to represent an empirically undefined, idealized variety of the language spoken by upper class individuals residing in the capital city of Latin American countries or Spain. The polemical nature of this use of 'standard' becomes immediately clear: the standard language changes as one moves from country to country. This makes the analyses of USSp problematic, as there is no single standard that can be employed to determine whether some feature or another is standard or non-standard. An aim of this article, then, is to work toward establishing an empirically grounded, data driven description of a variety of Spanish found throughout the Spanish-speaking world. I employ the label 'General Spanish' (GS), introduced by Otheguy (1991), to identify this variety as an alternative for 'standard'. An important distinction between GS and SS lies not only in the empirical grounding of the former, but also the fact that it has not acquired the semantic and analytical baggage of the latter. A grammar of GS seeks to cut across social, economic, gender, educational, and geographic lines, to name only a few of the factors that impact SS. A GS grammar would then provide a useful norm for determining whether one feature or another of USSp is regional in nature, or a member of a set of features found throughout the Spanish-speaking world.

### The 'standard language' ideology in the Spanish-speaking world

As noted in the introduction, the term 'standard' often applies to various measures that do not change across space and time. A meter was a meter in 1960 and remains so today, measuring the same amount of distance on any part of the globe now as it did then. To be sure, the metric system is not some preternaturally ordained phenomenon that has existed since time immemorial, but rather a compact established between nations and ratified through treaties. Standards can indeed be changed; the meter established in 1875 was recalibrated in 1960, for example. However, the advantage of a standard is that it represents some norm that individuals, communities, and nations can agree upon and accept. This may be facilitated by recurring to some common natural phenomenon verifiable through scientific study and subject to little political debate. For instance, the current meter is based on the wavelengths of light. No matter what national, political, religious, or philosophical leanings one might have, they do not affect the

wavelengths of light. As a result, to the best knowledge of the author, there exist no national, political, religious, or philosophical movements dedicated to the complete and permanent eradication of the metric system due to its ideological underpinnings.

The concept of a 'standard', then, becomes tremendously attractive for those who do wish to further ideological interests through language use by appealing to the notion of scientific, empirically based analyses, given that the common notion of a standard implies an invariable norm. However, the standardization process of a language differs fundamentally from one in, say, the physical sciences. Such a process can be understood more accurately as the reification of one variety of a language over another by those who possess a) the means of supporting the standardization process and b) do so to support a particular agenda, be it political or other.

With regard to Spanish, the political standardization process can be traced in modern times to the publication of Antonio de Nebrija's *Gramática Castellana*, published in 1492. Whether Nebrija intended his *Gramática* primarily as a political tool for empire building is a matter of debate; in his *Prólogo* he appears interested in replicating the grammars of classical authors as a scholarly exercise. However, there can be no doubt of an awareness at that time of language as an implement for conquest. Nebrija writes:

Cuando en Salamanca di la muestra de aquesta obra a Vuestra Real Majestad, i me pregunto que para que podia aprovechar, el mui reverendo padre Obispo de Avila me arrebató la respuesta, i respondiente por mi dixo: que, despues que Vuestra Alteza metiesse debaxo de su iugo muchos pueblos barbaros i naciones de peregrinas lenguas, i conel vencimiento aquellos ternian necesidad de recibir las leies quel vencedor pone al vencido i con ellas nuestra lengua [...]. (1946: 10-11)

Whatever Nebrija's intentions might have been in writing his *Gramática*, since the moments of its initial drafts, language was perceived of as an important tool of empire building. This process of using a variety of Spanish as a political tool of imperialism continued with the creation of the *Real Academia Española* in 1713. An initial goal of the *Academia* was "combatir cuanto alterara la elegancia y pureza del idioma, y de fijarlo en el estado de plenitud alcanzado en el siglo XVI". This recently was changed to "velar porque los cambios que experimente la Lengua Española [...] no quiebren la esencial unidad que mantiene en todo el ámbito hispánico". In spite of the disintegration of the Spanish Empire in the Americas during the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of Spain as the source of SS is promoted by some to this day (see e.g., Del Valle 2005, 2007, Del Valle & Villa 2006).

Whether Spain can re-institute itself as a center for a SS remains to be seen, especially given the fiercely nationalistic tendencies of its former colonies and their historic memories of a hated master. However, there can be no doubt that Spain was successful in exporting and establishing the *means* of standardization, in the form of the *Academias*. All countries whose principal language is Spanish, plus the United States and the Philippines, possess such an institution. Indeed, the webpage of the Real Academia Española dedicated to the Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española states that “Todas las Academias se guían por los mismos objetivos y persiguen idéntica finalidad: el cuidado y defensa del idioma común”. Hence, while there is debate as to which variety of Spanish may be the standard, the manner in which the standard is identified remains similar throughout the Spanish-speaking world.

However, as Del Valle notes in his discussion on the historic roots of the standardization of Spanish, “the scientific isolation of language –its total formalization– was difficult to accomplish: Language is just too sticky with associations, too closely interconnected with history, literature or philosophy” (2005: 143). He continues (2005: 144) to cite Fasold on this matter, who asserts:

I would dare to suggest that the most frequent single problem in installing a national language has nothing to do with vocabulary expansion, spelling or grammar standardization, the adequacy of the educational system or the presence of an ensconced colonial language. The biggest problem is that there often simply is no language that a sufficiently large majority of the citizens will accept as a symbol of national identity. (1988: 185)

With regard to Spanish, then, it is not a problem of identifying one language that can be accepted by that sufficiently large majority, in this case at the international level, but rather some *variety* of the language that serves that purpose. The phrase ‘Standard Spanish’ carries with it a significant amount of semantic baggage that includes the question of regional and national identity throughout the Spanish-speaking world, one of no small importance. At the same time, there are certain linguistic aspects of Spanish that allow Argentinians to communicate with Nicaraguans, Chileans to converse with Guatemalans, and New Mexicans to talk with all of the above. A principal goal of a general grammar of Spanish would be to identify those elements in order to separate regional variants from those found throughout the Spanish-speaking world.

In sum, I agree with Otheguy’s (2007) assertion that as researchers *how* we talk about a research topic, how we refer to it in our writing, is not inconsequential. He argues, for example, against the use of the term ‘Spanglish’ in our work on the Spanish/English dynamic here and abroad. While such terms carry wide popular appeal, they tend to obfuscate the very issues we research. This is not to deny the

existence of such popular terms, nor that they may offer a window into understanding popular linguistic attitudes towards certain language varieties. However, there are various levels of discourse, and those which are academic in nature demand a terminology as concise as possible. Thus, in the following I attempt to offer a means of identifying those common elements throughout the Spanish-speaking world that are relatively uncontroversial and, thus, suited for creating a grammar of GS that avoids the pitfalls of SS.

### Toward establishing a general grammar of Spanish

To begin with, in working toward a definition of a grammar of GS, I note that I refer specifically to a reference grammar in the tradition of Nebrija. As mentioned above, Spanish is a pluricentric language, each set of national varieties possessing the means of establishing usage norms for publishing reference grammars, textbooks, dictionaries, and the like. Linguistic studies document variation in semantics, pragmatics, and phonology, to name only a few areas. This being the case, a general grammar must avoid the attempt to impose uniformity on those areas demonstrating commonly studied linguistic variation. For example, a general grammar must circumvent establishing some common lexicon employed throughout the Spanish-speaking world. Regarding the challenge of establishing one single global lexicon, Torreblanca (1997) suggests that any Spanish speaker needs to assimilate a central Mexican standard variety:

pues esta variante [de México, D.F.] le permitirá comunicarse, sin dificultad alguna excepto ocasionalmente en el léxico (*este problema es insoluble*), con el mayor número de personas en el mundo hispánico. (p. 138, my emphasis)

However, such an assertion would create an immediate uproar *within Mexico itself* if seriously advanced; the good citizens of Chihuahua, for example, might well rise up in arms if they thought they would be forced to speak like the Mexico City *chilangos*. The advent of large corpora, easily searchable through computational technology, might provide in the future high frequency lexical items that are fairly stable throughout the larger Spanish-speaking world with regard to their semantic content. But even such a lexicon would not be truly general. As Otheguy (2007) observes, there will always exist regional lexical variation in all varieties of Spanish that would confound such an effort.

What remains stable throughout the Spanish-speaking world consists of the language’s grammatical morphemes and syntactic structures. I do not argue that variation in these areas does not exist, for it certainly does. For example, it is the case that variation between the overt expression and the null form of the subject

pronouns exists, and can be analyzed with regard to various linguistic and sociolinguistic factors (see e.g., Flores-Ferrán 2002, Cameron & Flores-Ferrán 2004). Rather, I point out that grammatical morphemes form closed classes; new grammatical elements such as verbal markers for tense, mood, aspect, person, and number do not pop up overnight, as can lexical items in open classes. Similarly, there exist certain syntactic structures commonly available to Spanish speakers. For instance, the direct object pronoun occurs before the synthetic future, 'lo hará con gusto', but can no longer be interposed between the future marker and verb stem, '\*har lo e con gusto', as was possible in Old Spanish, 'fer lo he de grado'.

Theories of grammaticization hold that centuries, perhaps even millennia, must pass before changes occur in closed class grammatical morphemes and syntactic structures (for general discussion of such theories see e.g., Heine *et al.* 1991, Traugott & Heine 1991, Bybee *et al.* 1994, Bybee & Hopper 2001, Bybee 2007; and for Spanish, Villa 1997, Torres Cacoulios 2000). As a result, we currently have relatively stable, closed groups of grammatical morphemes and a certain set of syntactic structures available to Spanish speakers throughout the Spanish-speaking world. Regarding the identification of elements such as grammaticized morphemes, extant research such as that of Menéndez Pidal (1980), Lapesa (1981) and Penny (2002), to name only a few, identifies their source in Vulgar Latin, which then facilitates analyses of their respective paths of grammaticization (see e.g., Villa 1997, Torres Cacoulios 2000). These grammaticized morphemes can be historically attested through employing electronic corpora as well such as Davies' *Corpus del español* (2002-) and their current distribution and frequency also may be specified. A detailed discussion of those sets falls well outside the limits of this chapter, but in order to illustrate what an empirically grounded representation of them in a GS grammar would look like, I offer the following example of identifying one such closed set of morphemes.

#### Establishing a representation of subject pronouns for a General Grammar

Subject pronouns, while perhaps a mundane topic, represent a well established closed set, consisting of 'yo, tú, vos, usted, él, ella, vosotros, vosotras, nosotros, nosotras, ellos, ellas, ustedes', and Ø (null pronoun). These pronouns are the set commonly presented in reference grammars; I omit for the sake of brevity such forms as 'uno' and 'se'. Consulting extant research establishes the development of certain elements of the Spanish system from Latin, e.g. 'ego > yo, tu > tú, illa > ella'. In other cases, as the pronoun gradually was bleached of its semantic content, it fused with other morphemes to produce an innovative form, e.g. 'nos + otro + s > nosotros'. The *Corpus del español* establishes that these pronouns

occur since the earliest moments of the written record of the language from the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the exception of the two most recent additions, 'usted' and 'ustedes', which date back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The complete set of these pronouns, however, is not commonly used throughout the Spanish-speaking world. As Kattán-Ibarra and Pountain note, "In all of Latin America and in many parts of Andalusia, the vosotros/as form is not used [...]" (1997: 8.1.2). Micheau specifies the South and Central American countries in which 'vos' is used nationally and in which areas it is employed regionally (1991: 85-86).

This brief analysis results in identifying the subject pronouns, their development, and which are general and which are regional. Following Kattán-Ibarra and Pountain's (1997) format, a grammar of General Spanish would present the pronouns as shown in Table 1.

One might argue that suggesting 'ustedes' as general in the second person informal plural is inaccurate, given that an alternative exists in one area of the Spanish-speaking world. My observation here is that 'ustedes', while not the norm in certain areas of the Iberian Peninsula for that function, is certainly utilized and recognized there. Conversely, the same cannot be said for the 'vosotros/as' forms; Acevedo (2000) notes that those particular pronouns were never part of Spanish in the Americas, as they apparently were not exported along with the GS subset during the colonization of the Americas. Again, a grammar of GS does not seek to account for linguistic variation, but rather to identify common grammatical elements found throughout the Spanish-speaking world.

I assert that this presentation is an accurate representation of general and regional subject pronouns. However, the presentation of these pronouns in SS grammars and textbooks employed in the U.S. raises polemical issues. As García (1993) notes, historically there has existed in this nation a preference for a Castilian variety of Spanish for instructional purposes. She quotes Aurelio Espinosa, in a 1923 article entitled "Where is the best Spanish spoken?", who wrote that "the best modern Spanish [...] is that spoken by the educated people of Old and New Castile" (p. 244). As a result of this reification of a European variety as a standard, then, reference grammars and textbooks for SS may present regional variants as if they were general.

This is the case, for example, in a textbook used in New Mexico State University's program for Spanish language learners, *¡Dimelo tú!* (Samaniego *et al.* 2002). In that text, the 'vosotros/as' forms are presented alongside the other plural pronouns as if they were General (p. 54). A short note explains that the 'vosotros/as' forms are used in Spain, but it is not made clear if an instructor is to include them as forms to be learned or not. The 'vos' form is entirely omitted. As this is the case in

TABLE 1  
Subject pronouns

General Spanish:			Singular	Plural
		1 <sup>st</sup> person	yo	nosotros/-as
		2 <sup>nd</sup> person familiar	tú	ustedes
		2 <sup>nd</sup> person polite	usted	ustedes
		3 <sup>rd</sup> person	él/ella	ellos/ellas
Latin American systems:	the <i>voseo</i> system (used mainly in certain regions of Central and South America)		Singular	Plural
		2 <sup>nd</sup> person familiar	vos	ustedes
		2 <sup>nd</sup> person polite	usted	ustedes
Castilian system:	the <i>vosotros</i> system (used principally in northern Spain as well as in other regions of the Iberian Peninsula):		Singular	Plural
		2 <sup>nd</sup> person familiar	tú	vosotros/as
		2 <sup>nd</sup> person polite	usted	ustedes

many reference grammars and textbooks, it would appear that a strongly Eurocentric ideology underlies the writing and production of those works. Hence, an important goal of a general grammar would be to avoid such ideologies, in order to present an accurate representation of the distribution of grammatical elements.

That being said, I do recognize that a general grammar cannot avoid a political reading. In an important research stream, scholars analyze the attempts of the Spanish government to (re)institute the Castilian variety of Spanish as the standard for the Spanish-speaking world (see Del Valle 2005, 2006, 2007, Del Valle

& Villa 2006, Mar-Molinero 2000, 2006, among others). Once more, a deeply rooted notion in Spanish language ideology holds that the Castilian variety represents the 'best' form of the language. A seemingly harmless grammatical suggestion to identify certain pronouns in that variety as regional, and not general, directly confronts a Eurocentric ideology. Any questioning of the purported hegemony of a European variety of Spanish will undoubtedly cause friction at many levels, including the production of grammars and textbooks themselves.

At the same time, even if a Eurocentric standard were soundly rejected in the Americas, a General Spanish will be politically problematic given the success noted earlier in establishing the institutional system of the *Academias*. Any *Academia*, no matter where it is located, will be structurally elitist in nature, representing political and linguistic hegemonies of the country it resides in. A grammar that purports to represent common grammatical elements of the language regardless of social class, economic or educational status, gender, age or occupational field, to name only a few societal variables, directly challenges the hegemony of any *Academia*. Following the comments of one reviewer, I suggest that General Spanish is more than a simple change in metalanguage, but rather a focus on empirically verifiable descriptions of how Spanish speakers throughout the greater Spanish-speaking world use the language in ways that are common to all. Thus, a grammar of GS would represent a linguistic reality that could be interpreted as challenging the standardization processes carried out by the *Academias*. The overt recognition of the pluricentric nature of modern Spanish unavoidably represents a direct challenge to a centuries-old tradition, and will certainly create friction with those who employ well-established means of prescribing language use.

Finally, the reader will note that in its descriptions a GS grammar does *not* seek to exclude any of the subject pronouns from the general set. Rather, it aims to determine which are widely used and which are regional in nature. I emphasize this point as my goal to suggest a grammar that is as empirically grounded and accurate as our collective research permits. Eliminating extant forms, be they subject pronouns or any others, would be directly counterproductive to the goal of creating an accurate, reliable reference grammar. Again, a principal goal of suggesting a General Grammar is to avoid some of the obfuscating political baggage carried by a Standard Grammar.

#### Implications for USSp

I return to an issue noted in the introduction, that certain features of USSp are often labeled as 'non-standard' in the professional literature. The presentation of subject pronouns in a GS grammar offered above aims to distinguish between

that what is general or regional. It is by no means innovative; Torreblanca (1997) in essence makes the same observation in his discussion of Southwest Spanish (SWS). This does, however, accomplish an important task of creating a means to determine if some grammatical feature of SWS, or any other variety for that matter, pertains to Spanish as it is spoken throughout the Spanish-speaking world or not.

In order to illustrate the implementation of a General Spanish grammar for the analyses of certain varieties of SWS, data from a variety of New Mexican Spanish were analyzed from transcriptions of certain portions of the *New Mexico-Colorado Spanish Survey* (NMCOS). This project was directed by Garland D. Bills and Neddy A. Vigil of the University of New Mexico with the aim of creating a linguistic atlas of the Spanish spoken in these regions (Bills & Vigil 1994). The entire survey has yet to be fully transcribed; the corpus employed here consists of subset of transcribed dialogs, some twenty thousand words in all. For illustrative purposes, particular attention was paid to verbal morphology. This initial study revealed the use of the GS morphemes for verbal tense, mood, and aspect for the present indicative and subjunctive, the imperfect indicative and subjunctive, those for both the synthetic and analytic futures, the present and past progressives, to name a handful (see the Appendix for a sample of the data). Additionally identified were certain instantiations of regional variation in the verbal system, forms such 'traiba, fuites, estábanos, vido', and 'creigo', among others. In the sample of 3,276 verbs identified, the latter group consisted of 98 instantiations, or some 3% of the total number of verbs sampled.<sup>1</sup>

I hasten to note that this analysis was preliminary, and is ongoing; these percentages may well change as further work is carried out. However, for this initial analysis of this corpus, I believe it reasonable to suggest that this sample of New Mexican Spanish demonstrates a high degree of congruity with the verbal morphology of GS. It is in part this congruence, then, that allows New Mexican Spanish speakers to communicate with speakers of other varieties of the language.

### Conclusion

As I have observed in the introduction, many studies on USSp refer to certain of its grammatical features as 'non-standard'. I hope to have shown that use of that particular terminology reflects not so much an empirical reality, but rather a lan-

<sup>1</sup> I extend my sincerest thanks to the students in the Spring 2007 Structure of Spanish class for the excellent research they carried out on this project.

guage ideology, one that tends to be Eurocentric and/or elitist in nature. One solution to move beyond this analytical bias lies in re-thinking our metalanguage and employing terminology that carries less political, ideological, and semantic baggage. It would be greatly naïve to assert that a term such as GS is completely free of that baggage, as *any* term will carry with it its own ideology. However, in moving away from the 'standard' ideology, as a profession we can directly address issues we deal with on a daily basis.

One of them is how to present grammatical information to the students we teach, be they heritage speakers or second language learners. A General Grammar will avoid the necessity to make *ad hoc* decisions on what forms to present or not. Students employing a General Grammar will encounter, say, the subject pronouns common throughout the Spanish-speaking world. If the composition of the class is such that some or all of the participants intend to visit Spain, then the subsection on Peninsular varieties will serve them well. On the other hand, if the travel destinations include Central or South America, then the subsection on the *voseo* will be of prime importance. If students study for a career in health care in the U.S., then the *voseo* will also be of interest, due to the increased presence of Central American communities here. If Mexico is the country of choice, then the section on GS pronouns will suffice.

Pedagogy does not represent the only area that will benefit from the use of a General Grammar of Spanish. The linguistic research we carry out on USSp will be sharpened by the ability to distinguish between regional and general forms. It is the fact that the majority of the Spanish varieties we speak in this country are of working class or 'campesino' origin (Villa 2005). Some researchers, especially those acculturated in Spain or Latin America or who have some deep affiliation with those regions, may be tempted to analyze USSp as if it were being spoken there, and not here. But the 'standard' ideology, based on class, gender, ethnic, and economic factors that certainly impact language use in other Spanish-speaking nations, is not at play in this country. There can exist no doubt that speakers of USSp inhabit a social, cultural, economic, and linguistic environment unlike that found in any other region of the Spanish-speaking world. At any analytical level, we as researchers cannot understand USSp based on exocentric norms. USSp must be carefully studied in its own environments before its relationships to other varieties can be better understood. But one might suspect that USSp may be coming into its own on the international stage; again, work such as Villa's (2000) and Del Valle's (2006) articles points to the growing economic importance of USSp speakers in an era of increasing globalization. The recent *XXI Congreso del Español en los Estados Unidos* (<http://spanishintheus.org/>) witnessed an excellent collection of presentations on USSp; we must pay close atten-

tion to both the theoretical and ideological underpinnings of our research methodologies in order to carry that work forward.

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### Appendix

#### SAMPLE OF NEW MEXICAN SPANISH VERBAL MORPHOLOGY

(Note: both the interviewer and the consultant are speakers of New Mexican Spanish)

Interviewer: ¿Dónde nació usted?

Consultant: Yo nací en los Tomé, Nuevo México.

Interviewer: ¿En qué año nació?

C: Mil noventa y ...mil nove... mil novecientos treinta y nueve.

I: ¿Creció aquí... creció aquí?

C: Yo me crié aquí en Tomé.

I: ¿Todo su vida?

C: Sí, todo mi vida.

I: ¿Cuánto tiempo lleva aquí en esta casa?

C: En esta casa yo he vivido veintidós años.

I: ¿Y su papá nació aquí?

C: Mi papá fue nacido aquí en Tomé.

I: ¿Y también su mamá?

C: Mi mamá fue nacido aquí en Tomé.

I: ¿Y su esposo también?

C: Mi esposo fue nacido en Tomé.

I: ¿Cuántos hijos tiene?

C: Yo tengo tres hijos y dos hijas.