

## **Using Contemporary Oral Histories to Teach the History of the Spanish Language**

### **Introduction**

This project touches on principles of Service Learning, collaborative research with students and the use of emerging technologies. It also shows the practical applications of work done in the classroom and its usefulness in the community. There is a need to clarify principles of historical linguistics to university students through these methods of collaborative research and service learning to help them have a meaningful framework upon which they can hang their knowledge. Furthermore, this project was an opportunity to show that there are practical applications to the study of historical linguistics by doing something as simple as recording interviews with Spanish speakers in our area (around Fargo, North Dakota – this area is called the Red River Valley) and transcribing those interviews in Spanish. There are things you learn when you actually have to write out what someone else has said. There are things that you find you missed in the initial conversation. This study was done in the spring semester 2007 in the Spanish 351 Introduction to Linguistics: Phonetics and Phonology course. With today's technology using MP3 recorders, Skype, Audacity and other programs, only two of my 14 students actually used a hand held recorder with a mini cassette. Three used a tape recorder and one had access to a recording studio of sorts in the Speech Pathology lab. Some turned in the written assignment with a cassette tape. The other ten all turned theirs in digitally.

### **The TOKNS Project: The Description/Evolution of the Assignment**

Though I employed this assignment as a tool to help teach Linguistics, the original project evolved over 5 years ago. I had an ambitious student assigned to me through our University's Honor's Apprentice program. This is a program that pairs students and faculty in a mentoring relationship to work on collaborative research and give students an idea of the field that they are studying. Leah Kroger was excited to get her hands into the grease and get to work, but there was no established project for her to work on. One of the difficulties right off the bat was that Leah was only in a Spanish 101 course. To make a long story short, we found the best thing we could do was to give her an assignment that would channel her energies and make use of the skills she already had of leadership and organization. In collaboration with fellow students we sent Leah out on a mission to collect oral histories from Hispanic people in the community in English and Spanish. This evolved into a Service Learning project where by working with our local Migrant Health Services, Inc. we identified a need: conversation and company for elderly Hispanic patients with diabetes in combination with the reality there were many people had a story to tell and were willing to tell it. The need on the side of my students was that they needed conversational practice in Spanish. At first we just recorded these interviews on tape and then we realized how beneficial it would be to have them transcribed and written down. Some of the stories were amazing. The name TOKNS is explained by Leah on the first page of her introduction to the book,

The acronym, TOKNS, stands for Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska and South Dakota, the states that immigrants typically travel through to reach their final destination of Minnesota or North Dakota. Alfred Muñiz, one of the people interviewed as a part of this project described his journey as follows:

*'To get from my hometown in Eagle Pass we come to Texas and drive and drive. We go through Oklahoma? Yeah, Oklahoma...and keep driving and get to Oklahoma and then Kansas and South Dakota and North Dakota and then Minnesota. It's about five states...we come and stay maybe eight months and then we go back and stay another four or five months and then go back.'*

### **Application for Class**

I quickly noticed by the way things were said in the interviews and the comments and questions I received from students that there were principles of Linguistics that fit right in to what the students were finding, particularly sociolinguistics and even language change. Many of these principles I taught in my linguistics courses, but I would always use examples from the text or try to drum up examples from English pertinent to the area we live in.

Students need to learn how language change works and get an understanding of what we are talking about in this process. I embrace the theory that “sound change is absolutely regular” and “that analogical processes may be at work not only in observable history but can be postulated also for prehistoric periods.” (Preface to Hock)

William Labov's work in sociolinguistics has “revolutionized our thinking about the nature and motivation of all linguistic change.” (Preface to Hock) Beyond getting students to understand the fact that languages change and that that change is not merely random, getting them to understand that these phenomenon are observable and are open to analysis makes for an exciting live language laboratory. Some of the principles of Historical linguistics are:

- Regularity of sound change in context, time & type – and what that means
- Languages in Contact
- Lexical borrowing
- Semantic change
- Dialectology
- Analogy
- Substrata & Superstrata influence

It is fascinating to see the process through which students went to dictate the language they collected in their interviews both in English and in Spanish. As they would ask me questions they asked me about the process, I could see that they were extrapolating their own theories of how languages changed over time.

Based on my experience with the TOKNS project, I decided to use that book as a supplemental text for my Phonetics and Phonology Linguistics course. Using it in the class allowed the students to see models of the kind of information they would be finding and also prepare them for the kind of language they would listening to. The assignment in the Linguistics class was to find and interview someone and dictate the entire interview in Spanish. I found that I need to teach the students to interview because they don't necessarily know how to ask questions. I would ask them to find out cultural information about the people they spoke with and they would ask questions like, “Is there anything cultural about your people?” or “Do you celebrate birthdays different?” or “Do you believe in witch doctors?” Interviewees would respond with statements like, “Nada es diferente” or “Tenemos las mismas tradiciones que tienen ustedes...” (Ruby- 42) and then they would go on to say that everything is different from Ash Wednesday to the Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe and the Día de los muertos, etc.

Students were also required to do a Phonetic transcription of one half of the interview as practice. The difficulty level ranged from scripted (Wendy) to very off the cuff (Ruby) – an

interviewee who spoke in a sort of continuous stream of consciousness. Students inevitably came to me with passages they frankly had no idea what was being said. Some students would miss the little words – even though they know (based on their grammatical instruction) that they should be in there, i.e. “Teníamos (que) estar” en casa... (E. Arroyo p. 3) o “se siente (a) gusto en la iglesia” (E. Arroyo p. 4) o “si vas (a) la iglesia” (Arroyo p. 5). Word they were unfamiliar with would pass unnoticed despite how they were being used by the Spanish speakers. For example in one case where the speaker was referring to working for the company Del Monte, the student transcribed the word as “Delmante” because he did not recognize it. Another was the name, “San Isidro” that was mistranscribed as “San Hicero.”

As they enter into the dictation/ transcription stages, there is a need to help them distinguish between what Hock refers to as “minor deviations from a given norm”, “speech errors,” “analogical replacements” (highly irregular) and evolutions in the language (Hock 653). For example, one process we could highlight was taking a close look at lost intervocalic voiced fricatives or lenition in words like: *bebé, cansado, agua* because the students would encounter these words in rapid episodes in the speech of those they were interviewing and realize how many words can be crammed into a split second due to the nature of lenition. Another thing that happened as students transcribed the interviews was that they tended to make mistakes with vowel in atonic syllables. The only thing I can think of as I have listed to the same recordings is that as they were sounding it out to themselves as they transcribed, they heard their own pronunciation rather than that of the speaker.

Decisions about what to include and what not to include allowed me to teach about what is done with Medieval Manuscripts. There are a lot of “editions” done of original manuscripts. The Paleographic edition is the one where you merely type in the script as faithful to the original as possible, leaving in all the original spelling and punctuation (i.e. *ueritas, he q’fazer*, etc) A critical edition is one where the editor takes the liberty of “correcting” the language especially with regard to spelling and punctuation.

### **Regularity of Sound Change**

Students noticed the regularity with which speakers they interviewed would elide certain consonants and silibants. They would ask me, should we write *los amigo* or *los amigos* because the speaker doesn’t say *los amigos*.

### **Languages in Contact**

Interviewing native Spanish speakers born in the United States and raised on Spanish in the home and English in the school produced speech samples with a healthy mix of Spanglish and Espanglés.

*Cuando viví en California, era muy joven. Tenía de un año a seis años... Después cuando nos movimos para Texas. Era muy diferente. Es muy diferente, la gente, había mucha gente mexicano. Todos hablan español... La ciudad donde vivo es “Border City” o en México y hay mucha gente mexicana y todos hablan español. Cuando venimos a la escuela cuando teníamos un problema no entendíamos le podíamos preguntar al maestro o la maestra y nos explicaban y si no lo entendíamos todavía nos explicaba en español y teníamos dos maneras de entendernos en esas cosas. Es muy diferente en la escuela allí...*

*Mi familia como le digo, mi mamá y mi papá eran muy joven y cuando eran muy jóvenes a los trece, doce o trece años ellos cruzaban para los Estados Unidos ilegalmente.*

*Cruzaban el río y les dieron **trabajo en las labores** y a los catorce años mi papá y mi mamá se casaron y vivieron juntos en los Estados Unidos por un tiempo. Varias veces iba la Migra a las labores a checar patrones y varias veces vino mi papá y mi mamá con hermanos y hermanas por mucho tiempo con sus hijos y una o dos veces, talvez tres veces los pescaba la Migra y los llevaban para atrás también muy bien y hasta que después agarraron sus papeles y vinieron aquí y se quedaron a vivir en Laredo. – Ruby (19)*

*Las personas de acá, de los Estados Unidos, ahorran mucho no les gusta .... Un ejemplo está en los carros a los mexicanos no les gusta comprar carros y todos y a mi hermano, sí le gusta tener su carro ...tiene un **Mustang** y le gusta comprarle de todo a su carro. Le compra rines, llantas, estereo, tv, ...muchas cosas y la novia dice que no porque es mucho dinero y uno como Mexicano dice, 'Ah, es **okay**. Es mi dinero...y a mí me gusta que estar así'. – Ivan (24)*

*Y la ceremonia, por ejemplo, yo fui a un funeral este año de un **relativo** de mi tía que murió pero fue muy impersonal. – Sandra (39)*

*Yo creo que en las bodas en Colombia, por ejemplo, son **expectaciones** que tiene la familia de la boda. Pues a mi familia espera de mí que yo me case y cuando me case, me case bien. – Sandra (43)*

### **Lexical Borrowing**

As with most Spanish speakers who live in the United States, there is a great deal of codeswitching especially with regard to discussions about food, holidays and religion. In this first example from an interview in English – Nora uses only words that she has only ever known in Spanish.

*Well, we make **tamales**. We would all get there and get the **masa** and the **frijoles** and the **hojas** ready. We would all cook them on the 23rd and then on the 24th we would eat them for breakfast. We were all crazy and eating. We would eat from 12:00 and then at night we would put a turkey in and we would eat turkey in the night. – Nora (41)*

In the interviews in Spanish, Ángela, Ruby and Guadalupe all use words for dates and events they learned about in English by their exposure to American Culture:

*Lo que no celebraba en Perú es **St. Patricks**. En Perú tampoco se celebran mucho **Valentines** como aquí pero aquí es muy comercial. En Perú se celebra sin comercial pero se celebra casi todo. **Halloween**, se celebran Navidad, 4 de julio no se celebra porque es de los Estados Unidos pero se celebra 18 de julio es el día de independencia. – Ángela (42)*

*[Tenemos] las mismas tradiciones que tienen ustedes aquí nada más que las celebran más como, como ahorita que viene siendo como el miércoles es la misa que para ustedes es “**Ash Wednesday**” es una cosa muy grande y la cuaresma que viene siendo para ustedes “**Easter Season**” y “**the 40 days of Lent**” esto es muy grande para nosotros y no es como acá. La Iglesia Católica es la misma, la Virgen de Guadalupe. Yo tengo los santos, somos muy religiosos y tenemos santos de .... “**the saints**”. Agua bendita “**Holy water**” cosas así, no tienen en las casas diferentes y hay que persignarse al salir... - Ruby (42)*

*Bodas de México son muy bonitas y elaboradas. En México la boda es siete días, siete días y noches. No pueden tener “honeymoons” porque no tienen dinero, y todos de la familia vienen y ayudan con los fondos. La novia tiene que ser una virgen para llevar blanco, o es como “spitting in the face of” la Virgin Mary. – Guadalupe (46)*

*Una persona debe decir nueve **Hail Marys**, nueve **Glory Bes**, y nueve **Holy Fathers**. En el cementerio no puede “hold hands” con un novio o novia, no puede caminar sobre las tumbas. – Guadalupe (40)*

*En la boda es un poquito diferente nada más. No hay **bridesmaids**... -- Ángela (45)*

### **Semantic Change**

*Él estuvo dos años en la cárcel, en **la pinta**, la penitencia – which is prison – por ilegal que luchan muchas veces viniendo. Él tiene que trabajar. En México no había trabajo. Por el desierto caminaba con unos **tíos**. Desde los once años. –Teresa (28)*

*A todas las mujeres les encanta echar cuentos y hablar de las personas. Entonces **chismosear**. Les gusta **chismosear**. – Sandra (43)*

*Nos hace practicar y atender **chavalíos** y **chavalías** que está más mayor y lo que sea. Pero están muy **duro**. – Armando (47)*

### **Dialectology**

*y se me cayó mi pulsera de la mano,...my bracelet slipped off... cuando tenía la mano para fuera. Dice **así na** allí por lo que me quedaba grande, tengo muy chica la...y so... , voltee el carro para agarrarla –Ruby (61).*

*Cuando me he enfermado de gripa, de todo eso de la garganta, pero ya sabemos que tomar pastillas. Nuestras mamás nos dicen que...desde chicos que es bueno y ya sabemos...**nada más** lo compramos aquí – Francisco (55)*

*Los últimos de mayo, en junio y julio nos **regresamos para atrás** para Laredo – Ruby (68)*

*porque nunca sabía pero **luego luego** creen que nosotros somos migrantes porque somos mexicanos pero de veras somos pues, éramos maestros que veníamos para ayudar a los migrantes pero luego creen que nosotros somos inmigrantes. – Laura (63)*

### **Analogy**

Students found analogical changes and would ask me what to do with *papases* and *hablastes*. They discovered that even native speakers of Spanish use forms such as *sabo*, *supí*, *tuví* and *la problema*.

### **Substrata & Superstrata influence**

*No hay suficiente soporte del gobierno para los agricultores en el nivel que ellos puedan hacer una vida, o cualquier tipo de dinero fuera para plantar cosas. (Sandra 30)*

Hans Heinrich Hock in his book, “Principles of Historical Linguistics gives us this caveat, “[some] linguistic rules can be said to be ‘observable’ and extendable...this observability and

extendability rarely obtains at the fully conscious level. Still, we are not dealing with purely mechanical processes which are completely beyond the speaker's control." (Hock 656)  
Understanding that a speaker may even be aware of their deviations from the norm and yet employ certain linguistic forms helps the students see their own use of the language as part of a larger process of language change that is not "purely mechanical."

## **CONCLUSION**

Truly, I have to confess that I derive no small satisfaction about the fact that my students are hearing culturally rich experiences straight from the mouth of people who have lived incredible experiences of hard work, discrimination, sexism, racism, poor health and injuries and daring tales of escape from war torn countries. They are listening to people whose lives are dripping with folklore and what many would consider mythological beliefs and practices. The fact that their ability to communicate in Spanish increases both understanding and being able to make themselves understood is amazing and inspiring.

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