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FORUM

A NECESSARY DISCIPLINE: HISTORICAL ROMANCE LINGUISTICS

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Volume 31.2 of this journal carried a Critical Cluster *Historical Romance Linguistics. The death of a discipline?* edited by Steven Dworkin. The title, as he admits in his introduction, "Thoughts on the future of a venerable and vital discipline", is a pessimistic and deliberately provocative one, inspired in fact by a lecture of George Greenia ("Science as (Pre)Text and the Death of a Discipline"), who provided the initial encouragement to organize the Cluster. Dworkin says that the title elicited reactions from some of those invited to contribute ranging from surprise to outrage; I was among them, but my response was, perhaps, the most extreme of all: I declined. My reason was that the title ran the risk of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy (I may have used the word "suicidal"). Even in the academic community we live in an age of soundbites, and "death of a discipline" could turn out to be a death sentence, especially in the already difficult situation described in Dworkin's introduction, where in some US universities, and to some extent in Europe, graduate programmes in the field are currently in decline.

Undaunted by my surly rebuff, Steven Dworkin has been kind enough to give me a second chance, by inviting me to overview the whole Cluster. I still think that the original title may have been unfortunate, but the exercise has unquestionably been a most valuable one, and the result deserves to be read not only by other Romance linguists, but by historical linguists at large. Of course, the question whether Romance linguistics is a "dying discipline" needs to be answered on two levels which are not as intimately connected as they would be in an

ideal world: (a) has the whole enterprise of Romance linguistics run out of intellectual steam? and, (b), is the field at risk of losing its representation in universities? That the answer to (a) is overwhelmingly “no”, and that to (b) is “yes” (but in some countries and institutions more so than others), is unsurprising. Turkeys are unlikely to vote for Christmas, and asking a body of Romance linguists such a question will rather predictably elicit such answers. It is perhaps a pity that a dissenting voice could not have been found, but then I cannot easily imagine *who* might have been called on to provide such a voice. For historical Romance linguistics is possibly suffering more from neglect rather than from any coherent intellectual or political opposition, and the real issue is how to harness the powerful intellectual case made in this Cluster to a strategy that will advertise the importance of the subject and help ensure that it maintains a firm hold in universities.

The consensus emerging from the Cluster is that, far from being a moribund and desiccated backwater, historical Romance linguistics constitutes a discipline whose dynamism and potential lies in its possibly unique capacity to deploy evidence from multiple related languages, at multiple stages in their histories, and from multiple types of attestations. Its great weakness is compartmentalization and attendant lack of focus, manifested in the inability both of the institutions that host our discipline, and of many of us as its practitioners, to embrace the full complexity of the field. Indeed it is perhaps significant that one respect in which several contributors gave the subject a clean bill of health was at the level of international conferences and specialist journals: precisely fora in which the multiple facets of the subject are best able to interact.

The term “historical Romance linguistics” is arguably tautologous. Romance linguistics is, *by definition*,¹ a comparative subject, where any comparison of genetically related languages inevitably leads to reflection on historical evolution. Romance historical linguistics is at its most powerful, insightful and intellectually demanding when it is most fully comparative, with its practitioners commanding and integrating the great wealth of sources of evidence at our disposal. There is a strong consensus among the contributors to this effect. Jerry Craddock’s “Reflection on a premature intimation of impending doom” clearly iden-

¹ I am not certain that every contributor to this Cluster would concur, but to me it seems that the linguistic study of individual Romance languages without a comparative aspect simply cannot bear the label “Romance linguistics”. That Romance linguistics also has much to offer to students (and teachers) of individual Romance languages who may not be aspiring Romanists is of course also true, as Rini observes.

tifies the perils of losing a comparative perspective, with attendant compartmentalization of the field. Joel Rini's "Romance linguistics: an evolving discipline" also stresses the insights afforded by a comparative perspective, as does the contribution of Michele Loporcaro whose own comparative studies of phenomena such as *raddoppiamento fonosintattico* (1997) or participial agreement (1998) are nice illustrations of the value of the maximally comparative approach; in the same fruitfully comparative mould are, for example, Sampson (1999) or Cravens (2002). The need for an approach that is also "globalizing" in the complementary sense of exploiting to the full the range of different types of linguistic evidence (textual, dialectal, etc.) which may bear on a particular problem in a particular language is made by René Pellen in his "Diacronía y descripción del cambio lingüístico". Peter Koch, "Historical Romance linguistics and the cognitive turn", stresses the power of comparative Romance empirical data to throw light on what constitute cognitively "natural" approaches by speakers to the expressing of a particular meaning (for example, in existential constructions), with the Romance languages serving as a perhaps uniquely well-documented microcosm for further research across a wider range of languages.

Not the least of Lausberg's daunting prescriptions (1965: 15) for Romance linguistics is the following:

El máximo de requisitos se alcanzaría mediante un perfecto dominio activo y pasivo de todas las lenguas y dialectos románicos. Pero este máximo resulta inalcanzable individualmente. Sin embargo, la Sociedad de Romanistas debería, por medio de medidas pedagógicas y planificación de las investigaciones, hacer que el máximo de estos requisitos fuese alcanzado, al menos colectivamente, por el conjunto de los romanistas. En cuanto a cada romanista en particular, el grado de dominio de las lenguas y dialectos románicos que haya alcanzado (en extensión e intensidad) constituye una limitación sensible de los problemas científicos abordables y de las posibilidades de conocimiento, así como de la exactitud de su propio discernimiento.

Polyglottism really is a *sine qua non* of good comparative Romance linguistics. But a major difficulty that we face is (as Koch observes for Germany, but the observation has much wider validity)² that students

² This needs to extend beyond the Romance languages. Another serious drawback

too often study just one, at best two, Romance languages. Aspiring students of Romance linguistics often simply know too little of other Romance languages, a limitation and fragmentation of knowledge undoubtedly exacerbated by the type of individual language-based departmental divisions identified by John Charles Smith (“Romance linguistics: future perfect or future in the past”), which tend to hinder courses of cross-linguistic study.³ Compartmentalization is of course also an effect, as Wanner underscores, of the expansion of our knowledge and the increasing refinement and sophistication of theoretical approaches, making it difficult for any one scholar even to come near mastering the whole of the field.

To my mind an effect of these various sources of fragmentation is becoming all too often observable in articles or even whole books –I refrain from naming names– which purport to deal with such and such a phenomenon “in Romance”, but where the languages considered are in reality just one or two of the better-known western Romance varieties. In truth, too many of us professional Romance linguists have unfortunate linguistic blind spots. For example, even as important and accessible a “standard” Romance language as Romanian is often woefully neglected or misrepresented in the comparative literature; Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu (1999) makes salutary reading in this regard.⁴ It seems to me that one major task facing those of us who teach Romance linguistics is to encourage our students to learn one or more Romance languages beyond those which they already know. This much should be an integral part of all Romance linguistics courses, if at all possible. Jens Lüdtke qualifies the German ideal of the *Vollromanist* as someone able to teach the linguistics of several Romance languages as an “objetivo cada vez menos realizable” but, in full cognizance of all the practical difficulties involved, I think that we should all the time be striving to make it “realizable”.

Many contributors stress how much there is in Romance linguistics that is original and innovative, particularly the collocation of linguistic changes within their social and cultural contexts.

(obviously, outside the Germanophone world) is ignorance of German, the language of so much of the traditional canon of Romance linguistics.

³ Smith makes the interesting observation that studies of Romance in Romanophone countries may paradoxically hinder truly comparative work by being too exclusively oriented toward the study of the local Romance languages, a point also made by Pellen.

⁴ Yet even in this respect Romance linguistics has a lesson to teach general linguistics. If Romanists can get the facts wrong with a language so close to home as Romanian, what faith are we to put in theoretical claims erected on the basis of much more exotic and imperfectly attested tongues?

Johannes Kabatek, “La lingüística románica histórica: tradición e innovación en una disciplina viva”, emphasizes the importance in the Romance tradition of a non-linear, non-mechanical vision of linguistic evolution, which takes proper account of social and cultural contexts and influences, and the coexistence of linguistic variants, a point also well made by Jens Lüdtkke in his study “Para la historia de la lengua”, which stresses the relevance of the study of synchronic linguistic structure for our understanding of diachrony; Ralph Penny makes the same point.

A superb example of the capacity of Romance linguistics to make new and original contributions to general linguistic theory is given by (and in considerable measure due to) Roger Wright, who reiterates the special value of his approach to this Cluster in “Historical Romance Linguistics. The renaissance of a discipline”. Indeed I am not aware of any other domain of historical linguistics which is able to throw such light on the thorny question of what it means, *from the perspective of the speakers*, for “one language” to “become” many different languages. It is in any case certain that the pioneering work done within the Romance domain will provide a benchmark for similar studies in other language families. Ralph Penny, in “Historical Romance Linguistics. A sociolinguistic perspective”, also cogently develops the point that the relatively new “sociolinguistic” approach to Romance linguistics helps towards a solution of the “actuation” problem in language change. By the way, the title alone of Michele Loporcaro’s study “Muhammad, Charlemagne, and apocope, or the cultural relevance of Romance historical linguistics” illustrates the capacity of our field to draw on “external” factors (the impact of Islam and the Latin-Romance transition), and in turn to contribute to fields beyond our own.

The defence and illustration of Romance linguistics that emerges from these studies amounts to an extremely strong case for a subdomain of general linguistics whose task is the holistic description of the emergence of a family of languages from a common source, of the parallels and differences in the development of that linguistic stock, of the mutual influences between those languages (and between them and their source language, where it is preserved), and of social and cultural influences which have borne on linguistic development. That Romance linguistics provides an ideal test bed for general linguistic theory is no less true for being something of a cliché, and the point is well reinforced by María Teresa Echenique Elizondo in her contribution “Perspectivas de la lingüística diacrónica y lingüística histórica en el estudio de la lengua española”.

My guess is that the best prospect for Romance linguistics is to stay close to general linguistics, and to assert itself as having a vital role in the study of language change. One particularly stimulating contribution to this Cluster, Kenneth Wireback's "From Romance to linguistics: should it matter?", diagnoses not the death of Romance historical linguistics but a falling under the sway of general linguistics, which in his view is neither inevitable nor inherently desirable. He constructs a eloquent case for Romance linguistics as a subject which is *sui generis* and has as its central goal "to explain the how and why of language change across the length and breadth of the shift from Latin to the modern Romance languages", and which is not necessarily best served by close links with general linguistics. My own sense (and it is one that I seem to share with the majority of contributors), is that, given the relative strength of general linguistics in many universities, our field is most likely to prosper as a close adjunct of general linguistics. In purely pragmatic terms, the central goal which Wireback identifies will paradoxically be best served by staying close to linguistics (and, *pace* Wireback, I see no reason why such a situation should not *foster* research into the various problems he identifies as peculiar to our field and still unresolved). Such a stance may also best shelter us from the purloining of posts in Romance linguistics for literary subjects, against which Rini protests.

I am not quite convinced that our goal should be what Dieter Wanner ("Romance linguistics is alive and well") terms a "resolute attachment to the linguistic theory of the day". Unquestionably we should be *au courant* with all contemporary theoretical developments, and the contribution that Romance linguistics has made to contemporary theory is, as Wanner shows,⁵ considerable. But Romance linguistics can and should go further. The strongest case one can make is that *general linguistics needs Romance historical linguistics*. To put it more accurately, if more obliquely, general linguistics needs to be thoroughly imbued not only with a sense of the powerful insights offered by the study of diachrony,⁶ and of the complexity of the "external" as well as "inter-

⁵ Wanner identifies major lexicographical enterprises as a branch of the classical Romance linguistic conception which continues with its élan intact.

⁶ In my view, Wireback (page 124) overstates the gulf between general linguistic theory and the central aims (as he sees them) of historical Romance linguistics. In any case, one reason why general linguistics, or some branches and practitioners thereof, needs historical Romance linguistics is because the latter is almost uniquely in a position to give a more mature and nuanced view of what 'a language' and 'language' are, transcending the merely fashionable in linguistic theory; cf. also Kabatek's comments in this sense on page 36 of his article.

nal” factors that condition linguistic change, and this is something which Romance linguistics is in an almost unique position to offer: Wanner felicitously alludes to the “density of closely controlled data” which Romance linguistics has to offer. To quote Wanner once again, “the individual languages and language families such as the Romance group contribute the necessary concreteness and local flavour without which the field [of linguistic theory] would founder in inapplicable abstractions”. There may well be other families of languages –one thinks, for example, of those of China or India– whose study may offer comparable benefits, but it is very likely that Romance, given its accessibility and familiarity to western scholars –and its sustained ability to “preserv[e], reinterpret[.] and especially discover[...] new facts and connections”, as Wanner says– will more often than not be the language family whose study is best placed to fulfil that vital role.

My conclusions, in short, are that

- 1 The intellectual case for historical Romance linguistics is very strong.
- 2 The potential “enemy within” is neglect of a truly comparative perspective on the Romance languages.
- 3 The best route, politically, to ensure the prosperity of our subject in universities is for us to assert, loud and clear, that linguistics needs us.

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