

## *INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE*

### *“REPRESENTATIONS OF LINGUISTIC VARIATION: LANGUAGE, PRESCRIPTION, AND DISCRIMINATION”*

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Human beings are singular creatures, exhibiting many contradictions. We can accomplish the most impressive things, and, at the same time, perform the most vile actions. This paradox also applies to the intellectual domain. Whatever intelligence is (although much ink has been spilt, I'm afraid that that the exact answer remains largely unknown), undoubtedly human intelligence greatly stands out from a comparative approach, for it allows amazing cognitive attainments, in which language is crucially involved. As Dennett (1995, 1996) points out, language makes it possible to virtually explore new possibilities of action, therefore becoming a powerful system for producing future, or, to put it in MacPhail's (1987: 651) terms, a system of expectancies formation.

Therefore, the vast intellectual power we are endowed with has allowed us to build (and to design, in advance) skyscrapers over 2000 feet in height, to send spacecrafts to the edges of the Solar System, to discover the molecular bases of life or to formulate the theory of relativity, amongst many other impressive findings. However, paradoxically at the same time humans are very vulnerable intellectually, in such a way that we are continuously deceived and manipulated (an example with far-reaching ramifications is the so-called Orwell's problem; see Chomsky, 1986: ch. 5), and we can uncritically embrace ideas which are unsustainable from the rationality that characterizes humans.

An obvious instance of the contradiction inherent to human beings is the blind acceptance of a huge array of prejudices, i.e. ideas which lack a rational basis, in such a way that who embraces them “actúa sobre la base de indicios

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insuficientes, tal vez sólo imaginados, y movida por inclinaciones selectivas escasamente racionales” (Tusón, 1996: 27). Hence the aforementioned paradox: human beings, who are taken to be ‘rational’ beings, very frequently embrace ideas or beliefs which are rooted in the absence of rational thinking.

As is well known, there exists a wide range of prejudices (biological, social, religious, sexual, etc.). Unfortunately, language is not free from them. Human language has two levels of variation: on the one hand, interlinguistic variation or diversity means the existence of thousands of different languages; on the other, each language, far from being a homogeneous or invariable entity, shows a wide range of internal variation (intralinguistic variation or diversity), as evidenced by the existence of many varieties (geographic and social dialects, and situational registers). Both levels of variation undergo many prejudices, which can be summarized in an asymmetrical treatment of variation: some languages are taken to be better, more logical or superior to others, and some language-internal varieties (paradigmatically, the standard varieties, given their prestige) are considered to be superior or more correct than the remaining ones (on both types of prejudices, see the extraordinary critical discussion in Bauer and Trudgill eds., 1998).

This special number of the journal *Representations. Journal of Studies on Representation in Arts, Science, and Philosophy*, entitled “Representations of linguistic variation: Language, prescription, and discrimination”, aims at critically analyzing the prejudices related to intralinguistic variation, both in general and from the Spanish language perspective. These prejudices assume that a specific variety (the standard one) is regarded as the ‘superior’ variety, the only correct variety (i.e. the unique model to follow), while the rest of varieties of a language are taken to be inferior, incorrect, and even degenerate or corrupt, the result being that they are discredited and stigmatized. This view derives from a deeply rooted prescriptivist view, which aims at imposing how language should be utilized, for according to prescriptivism the vast majority of speakers are taken to be ignorant, and thus are treated like lambs in need of linguistic shepherds.

Sadly, that view pervades society, as shown by the daily use of expressions like ‘to speak well’ or ‘to speak bad’. As pointed out above, though, this

asymmetrical consideration of intralinguistic variation is a prejudice. It shows the same conceptual structure found in other prejudices, based on the lack of justification in the relevant domain: in the same way that biological prejudices lack biological support, linguistic prejudices lack linguistic support, all of them being unfounded value judgements.

Therefore, no linguistic reasons support the superiority of one specific variety: as conclusively demonstrated by Linguistics, the standard variety, the supposed model of correctness, was initially just another dialect, which was spoken in a powerful area (usually, the court). For that reason, that dialect became prestigious, and the prestige grew as that variety was afterwards deliberately codified. To summarize, the alleged superiority or correctness of the prestigious variety relies on historical and social reasons, not on linguistic ones. These words by Schilling-Estes (2006: 312) are an excellent summary of a linguistically based position:

*all varieties of language—including those quite far removed from 'standard' or socially prestigious varieties—are equally complex, regularly patterned, and capable of serving as vehicles for the expression of any message their speakers might wish to communicate.*

As opposed to biological prejudices, these kinds of linguistic prejudices are much more deeply rooted, and go much more unnoticed: whereas many people would reject discriminating against human beings because of the color of their skin, their sexual orientation or their religion, they simultaneously would find it natural to discriminate against the nonstandard varieties of their language. Because these varieties are not abstract entities, i.e. they are spoken by people, that situation is very dangerous, for it can lead to (and, in fact, it leads to) discrimination against their users. Thus, as far I can see, it is crucial to eradicate these kinds of preconceived ideas on linguistic variation in order to ensure respect for all the varieties of a language (which are a key clue to both

the individual and social identities of their users), thus avoiding discrimination against people and achieving social justice (Charity Hudley and Mallinson, 2011, Corson, 1998; Corson, 2001). This is the only way of attaining a truly democratic society, free from any hints of discrimination. For such an objective to be reached, language also matters.

An obvious question is in order: if Linguistics has clearly established that the scorn of nonstandard varieties is just a baseless prejudice, why is this idea so widespread in society? Although the answer is complex, one of the reasons explaining the persistence of that prejudice has to do with the carelessness of linguists themselves: as Bauer and Trudgill (1998: xv) put it, despite the impressive advances in the study of language in the second half of the twentieth century, “linguists have not been good at informing the general public about language”. Bauer and Trudgill (1998: xv) keep on saying that:

*Linguists have been very busy keeping up with that developing knowledge and explaining their own findings to other linguists. The most influential linguists are the ones who have had the most important messages for other linguists rather than for the general public. For various reasons (including the highly technical nature of some of the work) very few of them have tried to explain their findings to a lay audience.*

This is the very aim this special issue deals with: to make it clear that the prescriptivist view prevailing in society, which overvalues the standard variety and undervalues the remaining varieties of a language, lacks any scientific support.

For such an objective to be reached, this special issue has collected five papers, some of which have been written by highly renowned linguists both in the Anglo-American domain (Dennis R. Preston, Nigel Armstrong and Ian

Mackenzie) and the Hispanic domain (Ángela Di Tullio). Although the five pieces discuss distinct issues, all of them should be regarded as complementary angles of the aforementioned aim the special issue is concerned with. When I invited those scholars to contribute to the special issue, I had in mind to get two types of papers: on the one hand, papers of a more general nature, placing the discussion in a wide context; on the other, papers applying such a discussion to the specific context of the Spanish language. This twofold scope, and the diverse origin of the invited scholars, explains the fact that two papers have been written in English, while the language of the remaining three is Spanish.

Next I will provide the reader with a brief summary of the five papers that make up the special issue.

The first piece, written by Professors Nigel Armstrong and Ian Mackenzie, is entitled “On prescriptivism and ideology”. The paper offers an extraordinary framework for the discussion developed by the remaining papers to be placed and fully understood. Armstrong and Mackenzie widely discuss the ideology which underlies the prescriptivist approach on language, and show that the main concern of prescriptivism is the creation of a uniform entity, i.e. the standard variety; hence the ‘standard language ideology’ (Armstrong and Mackenzie, 2013; Lippi-Green, 1997; Milroy, 2001; Milroy and Milroy, 1985). The paper also characterizes some of the features usually attributed to that variety, like its uniformity and its primacy and beauty (on this last aspect, see Preston, this issue).

The authors show that variation, a natural phenomenon in every language, is considered by prescriptivism to be anomalous, for it is regarded as a deviation from a unique model (the standard variety); for this reason, to put it in Armstrong and Mackenzie’s words, standardization implies a “crusade against variation”. Both scholars enrich their piece by offering a historical overview of prescriptivism in several traditions (Roman, Spanish or French), and, interestingly, they find a significant difference between the causes underlying prescriptivism in the past and the present: while prescriptivism had in the past a purely instrumental function (having to do mainly with grammatical teaching), modern prescriptivism is the expression of an ideology which “appeals to a hierarchical view of society, and hence of language”.

In addition, the piece characterizes two very interesting phenomena, which have received much less attention: anti-prescriptivism, based on an egalitarian ideology, and anti-descriptivism. The latter phenomenon means that, although modern Linguistics rejects prescriptivism, paradoxically it risks contamination from the prescriptivist perspective, for the standard variety is taken as the grammatical model from which linguistic judgements are made (see also Milroy, 2001: 543). Armstrong and Mackenzie exemplify the risks of anti-descriptivism with the Chomskyan paradigm (see Weiß, 2007, who makes a similar point on this paradigm).

The second piece, written by Professor Dennis R. Preston, has a very significant title: “The silliness of the standard”. Linguists are respectful of all intralinguistic variation. Accordingly, as the reader can imagine, Preston’s aim is not “to cast aspersions on standards” nor to attack them, but just “to discourage the position of intellectual and even moral authority so often taken by proponents of the standard variety”. As argued by many linguists, the existence of a standard variety may become advantageous as a *koine* (on this topic, see García Abelleira and Longa, this issue). However, it is senseless to aim at justifying the idea that the standard variety, simply for being the standard, is superior to the remaining varieties of a language.

The paper analyzes the arbitrary bases of the standard language ideology, although it is to be highlighted that Preston adopts a strategy which differs from the usual one (therefore, his piece is especially welcome): while linguists have usually concentrated on showing that nonstandard varieties do have grammars which are as complex as the grammar of the standard (both types are simply different; see Labov, 1972), Preston takes the other way round: to demonstrate that some ‘sublime’ properties usually attributed to standards do not stand. Focusing on English, Preston brings his great expertise to the fore in order to contend that standard English is not superior on aesthetic or expressive grounds. In fact, the piece nicely shows that many times the standard variety is quite inexpressive. Beyond this, the paper is mainly devoted to showing indisputably that the standard variety is very poorly organized, for the properties of consistency, symmetry, and simplicity are absent in many cases, while those properties can be found in nonstandard varieties. Therefore, the standard cannot be taken to be more logical, nor endowed with a more efficient organization, than nonstandard varieties. Standard features discussed by Preston, like

asymmetrical conjugations, irregular forms, holes in grammatical paradigms, or arcane syntactic rules, do show the silliness of the standard; as Preston himself points out, “Nonstandards win these contests in each examined case”. The paper ends with a discussion of several feasible reasons at work for the disorganization inherent to the standard, like linguistic isolation, classism, or the features of the elaborate style.

Víctor M. Longa is the author of the following paper, entitled “Language gets corrupted! Prescriptivism and apocalyptic representations on language in a modern ‘Jeremiah’”. Although the main prescriptivist agent for the Spanish language is the Royal Spanish Academy, there also exist many independent authors who fully embrace the prescriptivist position, making up what can be termed ‘the industry of the standard’, i.e. a great number of references which aim at teaching language users to ‘speak well’. Longa’s paper is concerned with a critical analysis of five prescriptivist books written by a Spanish journalist, Álex Grijelmo, who condemns any trace of intralinguistic variation departing from the unique model. Grijelmo assumes a radical prescriptivism, hence he illustrates quite well the category of prescriptivists that Pinker (1994) refers to as ‘Jeremiahs’, “expressing their bitter laments and righteous prophecies of doom” (Pinker, 1994: 384) to the people who, in their view, corrupt language. The paper argues that Grijelmo’s views lack any linguistic support. Although the piece focuses on Spanish specifically, the critical analysis could well apply to any prescriptivist reference of any other language, like Lamb (2010) on English, for the prescriptivist framework is recurrent. Furthermore, the paper reveals how surprisingly some of the ‘language mavens’ (using Pinker’s, 1994 ironic term) ignore even basic aspects of language; the paper shows that Grijelmo’s books are packed with very unfortunate aspects, like misunderstandings, contradictions, ignorance of basic linguistic facts, and so on.

All of this illustrates a striking feature: as opposed to other domains, any author considers her or himself capable of writing on linguistic issues with authority. It would be inconceivable, though, for a non-physicist, to dare to write a manual of physics; however, as regards language, things are the other way round.

An issue on Spanish prescriptivism published by a Latin American journal like *Representations* could not be without the next paper. The piece, written by the

renowned Argentinian linguist Ángela Di Tullio, is entitled “American Spanish and the prescriptivist tradition”. The paper deals with the lack of recognition (or even scorn) experienced by American Spanish, due to the Spanish prescriptivist tradition. This tradition has regarded peninsular Spanish (the variety of the former metropolis) as the only correct model, and has accordingly considered many traits of American Spanish to be errors or vulgarisms; as Di Tullio puts it, “Las metrópolis suelen considerar con desdén la lengua de sus colonias, sobre todo cuando dejan de serlo”. Di Tullio’s exposition explores the past and the present of how the American Spanish has been perceived. Such a historical tour makes the paper even more valuable, for it provides the reader with a clear outlook of the traditional discrimination against American Spanish, even by American Spanish speakers themselves: as discussed by Di Tullio, at the beginning of the twentieth century the Argentinian National Council of Education prohibited the ‘voseo’, one of the more characteristic traits of some American Spanish varieties.

As regards the current status, Di Tullio argues that despite the alleged panhispanist turn of the normative, there still persists the monocentric tradition which postulates a clear asymmetry favoring the Spanish peninsular variety (on this issue, see also Senz et al., 2011). To show this, Di Tullio concentrates on the *Panhispanic Dictionary of Doubts*. Although this reference recognizes that Spanish is composed of different norms, in practice it becomes restricted to a standard Spanish or general educated variety which is conflated with peninsular Spanish (the same aspect applies for Paredes García et al., 2012, a handbook of the Cervantes Institute which rejects many traits of American Spanish). Di Tullio analyzes how the Dictionary considers several traits, and shows that they come off badly. To sum up, although according to Di Tullio some advances can be perceived as regards the approval of American Spanish features, a clear preference is still given to peninsular Spanish varieties. Obviously, this situation is incompatible with the ideal of a pluricentric language.

The last paper of the special issue, written by Naír García Abelleira and Víctor M. Longa, is “Teaching children to discriminate against. The expression of the ideology of the standard in the school”. As already noted, prescriptivism pervades societies, and this spread derives from a main reason: through the entire educational process (from Primary level through up until high school), children are firmly instructed in the standard language ideology, with the result that they fully assume that ideology, and will reproduce it in society when they



leave school.

Undoubtedly, school is a fundamental institution for people and society. However, it should be noted that the knowledge acquired there reproduces the mainstream principles and ideologies, which are imposed upon students as the only existing ones. García Abelleira and Longa's piece aims at showing how the school syllabus reproduces the mainstream linguistic ideologies; to put it in other words, how the curriculum reproduces the standard language ideology, and how such an ideology is presented as something natural. For such an objective to be reached, the paper scrutinizes textbooks on the subject of *Castilian Language* belonging to the four years of the Spanish compulsory secondary education (ESO, 12-16 years), and published by the two main textbook publishing houses in the Hispanic domain, Anaya and Santillana. The paper seeks to reveal how the ideology of the standard operates, through the strategies of overvaluing the standard variety and undervaluing nonstandard varieties and traits. The paper also contends that the view sustained by textbooks and schools fits in well with Lippi-Green's (1997) 'language subordination model', proposed by this scholar in the context of her impressive analysis of the mechanisms which help perpetuate the standard language ideology. Furthermore, the paper argues that the ideas sustained by these textbooks are false from a linguistic point of view. This points to the surprising and unexpected conclusion that schools reproduce ideas which are simple prejudices, when the educational system would be expected to eradicate any kind of prejudices (also the linguistic ones).

To summarize, textbooks provide the students with a very negative view on variation, which is presented as a problem to be avoided instead of a wealth to be promoted. The paper also brings to the fore an undesirable outcome of that situation: the educational system instructs children to discriminate against both the nonstandard varieties and the speakers who depart from the variety taken as the linguistic model. Therefore, the abandonment of the standard language ideology is a central requirement for a truly democratic school to be achieved, i.e. a school teaching the students to reject any discrimination, be it biological, sexual, linguistic, etc.

I could not close this brief presentation of the special issue without expressing my most sincere gratitude to the journal *Representaciones* and to the scholars who have contributed to the issue. Firstly, I would like to thank the

journal (and especially, Professor Leticia Minhot) for inviting me to become the guest editor of a special issue, and for fully supporting my proposal since the first moment I suggested this topic. Secondly, no words can express my gratitude to the authors who have contributed to this issue. I would like to highlight their enthusiasm for the proposal, and to thank from the heart their dedication, time and effort.

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