

**Book Review**

*Mi Lengua: Spanish as a Heritage Language in the United States*. Roca, Ana and M. Cecilia Colombi (eds). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003. 305 pp.

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One of the great pleasures in reading is when the things we read bring back memories of experiences that we had forgotten. Another is when our reading helps us to think about things in new ways. Seldom are these two pleasures combined when reading academic or professional articles. In a personal way, however, that was my experience when reading Ana Roca and M. Cecilia Colombi's edited volume *Mi Lengua: Spanish as a Heritage Language in the United States*. Consequently it is a challenge to write a review of the volume. On one hand, if the object of a review is simply to know what the book is about, the table of contents already shows readers what the various contributions offer. On the other hand, if the purpose of a review is to discuss the book's significance, Guadalupe Valdés writes a beautiful foreword that not only outlines the content of the articles but also highlights the importance and relevance of the topics.

As such, this review takes a different approach. Since the articles affected me in a personal way, I will forgo some of the formality of academic writing and will share some of the thoughts that I had while reading the articles. I hope those who read the volume will have a similar experience.

In my case the personal journey begins with Valdés' foreword in which she discusses how much attitudes about bilingualism have changed, citing the example of Gov. Rick Perry's efforts to learn Spanish. It is totally a coincidence, but I was Gov. Perry's Spanish tutor for nearly a year and a half. Others may not believe it, but his motivation to learn Spanish was personal benefit and an interest in learning another language. We almost never talked about Spanish within a political context. In fact, a few times I encouraged him to use his Spanish in public. His response was always, "Dr. Kelm, you may know a lot about Spanish, but you don't know as much about politics. If I make a mistake in Spanish or say something wrong, it will be in all the newspapers." Of course he was right, and I enjoyed much more the experience of teaching him Spanish for personal reasons. Today I am sure that he can order food, get a taxi, talk about his family, and perform a number of other tasks in Spanish.

The editors' introductory chapter entitled "Insights from Research and Practice in Spanish as a Heritage Language" sets a good foundation for the other articles. Colombi and Roca remind us that "immigrants are acquiring English at a rapid pace. It is the respective heritage languages which can erode as generations go by if these languages are not nurtured and supported by families, the communities, and the schools" (6).

I have great appreciation for a book that focuses on the academic side of language instruction and that begins by reminding us that families, communities, and schools all

work together to develop our attitudes about bilingualism. My reading of *Mi Lengua* coincides with a time in my life when I am studying German. My father is from Berlin and left Germany a few years after the war. He immigrated to Canada, where I was born, and then we continued on to the United States, where I was raised. Growing up, I never identified with my German heritage. My father was part of a generation that felt that it was important to integrate into his new host culture. However, now that I am learning German, I feel an awakening of my German ancestry. For the first time in my life I feel, well, German!

Although the title of *Mi Lengua* refers to Spanish as a heritage language (hinting that the topics relate to language education), the articles also discuss the relationship of the Spanish language to heritage speakers' identity. Consequently, a discussion of pedagogy is only part of the focus. This is an important distinction: how learners identify with Spanish, both as a language and as part of their heritage, is a new parameter in the teaching of foreign language, and we become more effective language instructors when we understand it.

*Mi Lengua* is divided into two major sections. Part 1 focuses on the theoretical considerations of Spanish as a heritage language, and Part 2 provides implications for instruction in the community and the classroom. Andrew Lynch begins the theoretical discussion in Part 1 by addressing heritage language acquisition in an article entitled "Toward a Theory of Heritage Language Acquisition." He leads readers through various theories of second language acquisition and bilingualism, concluding with a number of principles that assist in the "act" and "process" of language acquisition. To these he adds the "social" and "context" issues of learning Spanish in the U.S. Lynch helps readers see that our role in language instruction is not simply to correct the errors of those students who speak "español malhablado" (poorly spoken Spanish) but it is much more to help competent users of Spanish use their Spanish skills in new situations. (Readers will note that Dr. Lynch (2003) addresses similar issues in the inaugural volume of *Heritage Language Journal* in an article entitled "The Relationship between Second and Heritage Language Acquisition: Notes on Research and Theory Building.")

From my own experience I see where the context issues are vitally important. At the University of Texas I sometimes teach an undergraduate introductory course in Spanish phonetics. Frequently it is the first content course that many heritage-speaking students take after placing out of the basic language courses. Inevitably, after the first couple of days of class, one of these students will say something like, "Dr. Kelm, I apologize for the way I speak Spanish, but that is how I learned at home." It is ironic that as a German-heritage, Canadian-born, Portuguese-accented, nonnative speaker of Spanish, I get these comments from students who speak Spanish in their own homes with family and friends. But the truth is that the students are aware of how their use of Spanish differs from others'. Unfortunately, too often that awareness is interpreted as "bad Spanish." However, as Lynch notes "Just as none of us would expect a Spanish speaker from Buenos Aires to speak "the same way" as someone from Cuzco, Quito, Mexico City, or

Havana, we cannot expect a Spanish speaker from the U.S. to speak “the same way” as someone from these other parts of the world” (43).

María M. Carreira helps readers to understand the changing profiles of these students in her article “Profiles of SNS Students in the Twenty-first Century: Pedagogical Implications of the Changing Demographics and Social Status of U.S. Hispanics.” The traditional scenario is that first-generation immigrants are Spanish dominant, the second-generation children are bilingual (with a preference toward English), and the third generation speakers have limited skills in Spanish. However, Carreira helps us to understand that emigration and generational patterns affect the use of Spanish in the U.S. Carreira notes that “the rapidly changing demographics of U.S. Hispanics and the evolving social and political conditions currently affecting this population may result in substantial changes in the student composition of SNS (Spanish for Native Speakers) classes” (52). Specifically, demographics suggest that an increasing number of U.S. Hispanics will be U.S.-born, with intermediate and lower levels of fluency in Spanish, and a decreasing number will be foreign-born, with higher levels of fluency. At the same time, the availability and popularity of Spanish-language radio and television may result in a greater number of U.S.-born heritage learners of Spanish who have receptive skills. Not only do these changing demographics modify the characteristics of the individual students, but Carreira’s evidence shows that each region of the country is different and the attitudes about Spanish language are also different from one place to another. The origin of the speakers varies from region to region and so does the pedagogical implications, “SNS instruction must be regionally anchored. Pedagogical goals and materials that may be appropriate in Miami, for example, may be entirely out of place in the Southwest” (68). Readers will also note that Carreira (2004) has another article in the second volume of *Heritage Language Journal* that deals with the nuances involved in defining heritage language learners.

M. Cecilia Colombi next prepares readers for some of the theoretical implications of teaching writing to heritage language learners. Her article “Un enfoque funcional para la enseñanza del ensayo expositivo” (A functional focus for the teaching of expository essays) addresses the difficult area of helping students with strong oral skills to call on those skills in learning how to write. I recall a semester when we asked our students in an advanced grammar course to maintain a grammar portfolio. As part of this assignment one of my heritage language learners decided to build a portfolio on the uses of the verb “ser” (to be). Her intent was to review magazine and newspaper articles and find examples of the verb “ser.” Her entries included a number of sentences such as “Aquí se habla español” (Spanish is spoken here). This student then provided a very interesting analysis on how “se” was a form of the verb “to be.” For a person who has never had to conjugate verbs, read Spanish, or worry about grammar, it seems intuitive to think of the passive “se” as some form of the verb “ser.” And why not? “Se” looks just as much like a conjugation of the verb “ser” as “soy, eres, es, somos, son” and the English translation means “is spoken.” I remember being amazed at how hard this student was working to put the pieces together to understand how to read and write the Spanish that she already

spoke. I also remember what a good reminder it was for me of the care I need to take in teaching my heritage language learners.

I have often mused over the irony of the Spanish word for “standard.” It is truly amazing that the justification for the rejection of certain borrowed terms is to say that they are not part of “español estándar.” The final article in the theoretical section of the book addresses the issue of the stigmatization of regional speech. Ysaura Bernal-Enríquez and Eduardo Hernández-Chávez demonstrate the difficulties and frustration that heritage language learners face when they are told that their speech is inferior or wrong. The most poignant example comes from interview comments from a student of theirs:

Everything about our language is inferior: “This is how Spain does it.” But yet, when I talk about the way back when I was little, this is a word I remember, “Oh, no, you’re not supposed to say that!” Now, ‘bote’, and they say it’s something (like a sailboat)... I say, “No, no, no! Wait” ‘Cause my greatgrandma said that ‘bote’ was a bucket: ‘Ve a trae [trái] un bote de agua’. And now they say, “No, no, it’s a different word.” And I’m totally confused ‘cause I always knew ‘bote’ was a bucket... (107).

This example demonstrates the internal struggle that goes on when a teacher thinks he or she is merely correcting grammar. Speaking of these heritage language learners, the authors remind us “Ha aprendido su idioma en el seno de su madre y en los brazos de su padre y a veces de sus abuelos, y para el estudiante, la negación de su lengua equivale a la negación de sí mismo (106). (They have learned their language at their mother’s breast and in the arms of their father or even their grandparents, and for these students, the negation of their language is like a negation of themselves.) In my own case, my memories go back to my own German grandmother who lived with us when we were young. There were certain expressions and phrases that she would say that I never expect to see in a grammar book. Those phrases, however, carry a powerful and personal connotation. For example, whenever my grandmother called me a “bengel” I knew that it meant something like a mischievous troublemaker, but to me it was almost a term of endearment because grandma was the only person in the world to ever call me that. The comments from Bernal-Enríquez and Hernández Chavez say everything I feel about how legitimate a local dialect can be.

Part 2 of *Mi Lengua* shifts to a review of various studies, research findings, and their implications for instruction in K-16. One always appreciates research articles that are clearly replicable. And in this sense the first three articles shine. They are as follows:

- Hernández Pesina, Ernestina, Hinako Takhashi-Breines, and Rebecca Blum-Martínez. “Spanish in My Blood’: Children’s Spanish Language Development in Dual-Language Immersion Programs”
- Beckstead, Karen and Almeida Jacqueline Toribio. “Minority Perspectives on Language: Mexican and Mexican-American Adolescents’ Attitudes toward Spanish and English”

- Carrasco, Roberto Luis and Florencia Riegelhaupt. "META: A Model for the continued Acquisition of Spanish by Spanish/English Bilinguals in the United States."

"Spanish in My Blood" is a comparison of children's language development from two different immersion programs. The appendix alone is particularly valuable. The authors' list of speech acts, together with sample phrases that demonstrate each category, provide an excellent template for similar research. "Minority Perspectives on Language" similarly provides interesting feedback from students about their perceptions on the use of Spanish and English in their educational settings. "META" also provides a template for the "meta-analysis" that students go through that aid in language learning: Metapsychological, Metacultural, Metalinguistic, and Metacognitive. Part of this methodology grew from a response to the differential treatment that study abroad students had with their host family. It became clear that host families had higher expectations and lower tolerance of non-native speech patterns from heritage learners than from foreign language learners. Again, the curriculum design described in this chapter provides readers with an abundance of examples for their own implementation and replication.

The fourth article in this section, "La enseñanza del español a los hispanohablantes bilingües y su efecto en la producción oral" (Teaching Spanish to Bilingual Spanish Speakers and Its Effect on Oral Production) by Marta Fairclough and N. Ariana Mrak is not as directly replicable, but it is one of the most powerful in terms of the implications of their results. The authors look at grammar in oral production from three groups of adult speakers who were born in Mexico or whose parents had immigrated before the children were six years old. The three groups were speakers who had had: no formal instruction in Spanish; less than one year of Spanish instruction; and more than one year of instruction (in this case the average was three and a half years). Their results indicate that for oral speech, formal education did not significantly change the number or type of grammar errors that the informants committed. As such, we either need to question our methods, or to change the emphasis and focus on what we teach. The issue seems to be similar to that of fossilized learners in general. If the grammar is not improving with instruction, do we blame the quality and type of instruction or do we look at the validity of the instruction? Fairclough and Mrak suggest that we look at a new focus of instruction, "La evidencia aquí presentada indica que debemos cambiar el énfasis del salón de clase y ofrecer al estudiante una gama más amplia del léxico al que pueda tener acceso cuando su interlocutor es un monolingüe" (209). (The evidence presented here indicates that we should change our classroom emphasis and offer students a more complete assortment of vocabulary that they can use when the person they are talking to is monolingual) I recall one bizarre case of a family that moved to Texas from Vera Cruz, Mexico. Their son was 15 years old when they arrived and his high school had no classes for bilingual students. Since he had not previously "taken" any Spanish courses, they placed him in a first-year Spanish class!

I group the next three chapters together because each addresses heritage speakers' need to make adjustments in their speech as they move from the informal oral settings to formal settings or to written communication. Mariana Achugar examines this issue in the oral presentations that students confront in academic settings, "Academic Registers in Spanish in the U.S." Ana María Schwartz analyzes similar changes from her students in writing assignments, "¡No me suena!: Heritage Spanish Speakers' Writing Strategies." Rebeca Acevedo confronts this in teaching writing, "Navegando a través del registro formal: Curso para hispanohablantes bilingües." (Navigating through formal register: A course for Spanish-speaking bilinguals) In each case the authors emphasize the differences in register, as opposed to just language learning. That is to say, it helps learners to understand that their need is not to learn Spanish per se, but to learn how to modify their Spanish language skills to fit different situations. For example, the average teenager may feel comfortable talking to other girlfriends about the note that a guy has sent to her. This same teenager, however, may have a difficult time giving a formal talk at a large assembly. The language needs are not the same. We simply do not think of these different tasks as a deficiency in language ability. In many ways heritage speakers face a similar situation. The way they speak Spanish among friends and family is completely appropriate for that setting. What they lack is the ability to modify their speech for other settings. This is the perspective that we should have when working with these students and it is the focus of these three chapters. The final chapter "Spanish Print Environments: Implications for Heritage Language Development" by Sandra Liliana Pucci looks at the availability of various print media in Southern California as compared to the Midwest. She surveyed newsstands, supermarkets, minimarkets, libraries, and bookstores. Her results show that it is easy to find light reading materials at all locations in both geographical areas, but much more difficult to find more demanding readings. As such, she notes that instructional programs and school libraries should take on a more active role in providing reading sources in the heritage languages.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this review, reading *Mi Lengua: Spanish as a Heritage Language in the United States* was a personal experience for me, and I saw it as much more than simply an academic look at language instruction. It is impossible to separate language and culture when dealing with language for heritage speakers. The editors are to be congratulated for having combined so well a collection that balances both.