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Language history narratives: Between the mythical and the ecological

Language history narratives in the ‘West’ have often concealed diversity and discontinuity. This approach is still paramount in non-academic discourses on sociolinguistic difference and legitimacy, which ultimately feed off traditional narratives of language origin and descent (Canagarajah 2013; Hawkey and Mooney 2021). However, scholars in many fields (sociolinguistics, contact linguistics, linguistic anthropology) have increasingly called attention to the contradictions inherent in this genealogical approach and to the culture-bound nature of many of the theoretical assumptions underlying it. From this perspective, named language varieties and their purported linear histories are sociocultural myths (García and Li Wei 2014; Makony and Pennycook 2006). Insofar as many of the tenets of genealogical narratives are rooted in the assumed normalcy of monolinguals or the social segregation of language varieties, this re-writing of traditional language histories becomes a political act (Namboodiripad and Henner 2022; Otheguy et al. 2022).

By highlighting the inherent hybridity of the communicative practices of the language users of yesteryear and the multilingual roots of named languages, historical sociolinguistics has provided a home for this sociopolitical questioning (Del Valle 2013; Krogull 2021; McLelland 2021; Pavlenko 2023; Sanz-Sánchez 2024; Wright 2020). In turn, this conversation in our field benefits from concurrent debates in related areas, like contact linguistics, psycholinguistics and language acquisition, where many of the canonical categories of linguistic description and classification are also being questioned (DeGraff 2009; Higby et al. 2023; Leivada et al. 2023). The (post)colonial evolution of several European languages, which involved attempts at the transplantation of Western ethnic, ideological, and linguistic categories, has captured the attention of historical sociolinguists as they search for protocols to apply more ideologically aware, less category-bound frameworks (Deumert et al. 2020; Sharma 2023). In particular, ecological approaches to language evolution (Aboh 2015; Mufwene and Vigouroux 2017) have offered a platform for the multidisciplinary sociohistorical reframing of (post)colonial language histories - for instance, by enlisting psycholinguistic models of language acquisition and contact (Winford 2017, 2020).

This talk will provide an example of the possibilities afforded by the ecological framework to envision new ways of writing language histories, using Spanish as the test case (as articulated in Sanz-Sánchez 2025). I will revisit three moments in the evolution of Spanish and related areas of change that have figured prominently in previous genealogically rooted approaches to the history of the language. These include (1) the rearrangement of the 3rd-person clitic system during the southward spread of Castilian in the late medieval period (13th-15th centuries); (2) the phonological mergers of early colonial Spanish (16th-17th centuries); and (3) the emergence of 2nd-person address paradigms in post-colonial (19th-20th centuries) Latin American Spanish (Moyna and Sanz-Sánchez 2023; Sanz-Sánchez

2019; Sanz-Sánchez and Tejedo-Herrero 2021). I will argue that, for each of these settings and variables, an acquisitionally informed ecological lens can help us close the kind of gaps between historical data and sociohistorical language evidence that genealogical narratives have profited from to sustain the myth of Spanish as a historical linguistic essence. At the same time, this approach generates new challenges for historical sociolinguists: what are those outside academia hearing when we do research, and how can we work to avoid the co-opting of critical research by canonical discourses?