

The History of Spanish

by Joaquina Pires-O'Brien (July 2010)

Book Review of *Historia de la Lengua Española*

by Rafael Lapesa

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Rafael Lapesa's book *Historia de la Lengua Española* has been a major reference on the history of the Spanish language for nearly three decades, as can be deduced from its numerous editions and reprints since it was first published in 1981. It encompasses not just the major evolutionary phases of the Spanish language but also the cultural background behind it. Although the specialised readership can profit the most from this book, it has also a great deal of interesting things to amuse the non-specialised readership. One example is the clear and authoritative narrative of the historical backdrop that allowed the formation and the evolution of the Spanish language.

Spanish is one of the many Romance languages, together with Catalan, Portuguese, French, Italian, Romanian and many dialects. They all derived from the Vulgar Latin spoken by the Romans who occupied most of Europe and the Mediterranean from about one hundred years BCE (Before the Common Era) to the year 476, when the Visigoths' last assault on Rome brought down the Western Roman Empire. However, Vulgar Latin was not the only origin of Spanish and Portuguese. The Ecclesiastical Latin introduced in the Iberian Peninsula by the first Christians during the second half of the occupation also left its mark, while the creation of Modern Latin in the 15th century facilitated the creation of the first Romance grammars.

Lapesa's book starts before the Roman Empire and its occupation of the Iberian Peninsula. The latter was already occupied by other peoples including the Basques, whose descendants still live in the Pyrenees, on third and second centuries BCE. At that time Latin was just one among many other languages spoken in the regions of Italy and the Levant prior to the start of the Roman Empire. In the ancient Greek writing compiled by Herodotus (ca 480-430 BCE), there are many references to Iberia, such as the region in Huelva, Spain, which was occupied by Iberian settlers

that came from Northern Africa. Another indication of the presence of pre-Roman occupiers in the Iberian Peninsula is the matching of place names from Huelva to the Pyrenees in Etruria and other Italian regions.

According with the ancient Greek writings, the region of modern Andalucía and Southern Portugal was inhabited by the Turdetans, which belonged to the Tartesia civilization. The Turdetans would have received their influences from the seafarers from the Far East and are thought to be linked to the Tysens of Lydia in Asia Minor, who originated the Tyrens and Etruscans of Italy. The Spanish linguist Don Manuel Gómez-Moreno, decoded the Turdetan inscriptions found in Iberia and those from the original location, as well as most of the ancient inscriptions found in Iberia.

The Etruscans would also have settled in the Spanish coast from Levant to Mediodía (in the Pyrenees). The Phoenicians established themselves in the coast of Spain and founded the town of Gádir in 1100 BCE, in Gadir, now Cádiz. Another Phoenician colony is Malaga, in Andalusia, and Abdera (presently Adra), in Almeria. The city Cartagena was the New Carthage that the ancient Carthaginians founded in the region of Murcia.

There were also Greeks in the Iberian Peninsula before the Romans. Their settlements went from the South to the Levant region, where they spoke Lucent. Towards the middle and the West of Iberia there is archaeological evidence from cultivated fields and burial grounds suggesting the presence of Indo-European settlements from Central Europe, at about 1000 BCE.

Herodotus also refers to the presence of Celts in Portugal and in the Low Andalucía in the year 445 BCE, and further Celtic settlements are also thought to be likely. The Ligurian presence in Spain, which was also mentioned by other Greek historians, is supported by coincidences of place names in Spain and in the Liguria region of Italy. As recorded by the Greek geographer Estrabón, at the time of Augustus there was a great diversity of languages in the Hispanic Peninsula. After the arrival of the Romans, the whole of Iberia apart from the Basque region took up the language spoken by the Romans, by converting their vocabulary into Vulgar Latin. There is a

long list of words from the Spanish vocabulary that cannot be traced to Latin or to other languages, as well as many suffixes that are clearly Pre-Roman.

The early Iberians gave up their language after the Roman occupation, partly due to the pressures from the Romans and partly as a trade off for the security that came with the Roman rule of law introduced in the provinces by the emperor Vespasian. In 212 the emperor Caracalla made the Hispanics citizens of the Roman Empire. The Roman conquest changed the Iberian society. The customs the Romans introduced included those of the Hellenic civilization incorporated in their own culture. After the arrival of Christianity, the introduction of ecclesiastical Latin, including the text of the New Testament, helped to complete the latinization of the Iberian language.

After the end of the Roman Empire, however, the provinces became separated from one another and the result of that was that their language fragmented into different languages and dialects. From the third century the Germanic Vandals began to invade the Iberian Peninsula, causing a lot of destruction along their path. In 409, they invaded it again in massive numbers, shortly before the Visigoth king Alaric carried out the first ransack of Rome.

The mark of the Germanic peoples in the Romance languages is widely discussed by Lapesa. The Romance languages were to receive further changes from the Arabs, which moved to Southern Iberia to spread the new religion of Islam, arriving in Iberia just as the German invaders had began to settle. The first primer to teach how to write Romance was published in 1532 by Bernabé Busto, a court tutor, and it was during the rule of Phillip II that school children began to learn the grammar of the vulgar language.

The Christian reconquest began slowly from the 9th century. The culture of the early Christian Iberians combined their old customs with violent Visigoth habits of bloody revenges and family feuds, while disputes were resolved by force rather than by a rule of law. From the 9th to the 11th century there were some Christian kingdoms in Iberia, with defined legal provinces and parishes.

Castilian, as the Spanish language was called, began to emerge at the end of the medieval period when Hispanic writers decided to emulate their Italian counterparts and to write in the vulgar language instead of Latin. The first texts, from the 12th century, were with epic poems evoking past heroes and glories (*Mío Cid*, *Roncesvalles* and *Los Infantes de Lara*) while poems containing narratives (*Alexandre* and *Apolonio*) appeared later. In 1490 Alfonso de Palencia published the first vocabulary and in 1492 Antonio de Nebrija published the first grammar. After that, the first dictionary of Latin appears and the Bible is translated into vernacular. The Spanish prose finally came of age with the novels *Cárcel de Amor* (ca 1480), and *La Celestina* (1499) and *Amadis* (1508) which were translated into other languages.

The reverse of the Roman conquest occurred during a period after the discoveries when Portugal and Spain became powerful empires. Under Alfonso V, the Spanish empire gained control over Naples and from then on it was to exert a powerful influence over the entire Europe. This plus the rivalry between the Spanish and the English led the Spanish to publish Spanish dictionaries and Spanish grammars. Now it was the turn of Spain and its language to influence the rest of Europe. Examples of Hispanic influence include *sforzato*, *sforzo*, *sussiego*, *grandioso*, *disinvoltura* in Italian; *brave*, *bravoure*, *désinvolve*, *grandiose*, *fanfarron*, in French. The Americanisms that entered in Europe did so via Spanish, with words such as *potato*, *caiman*, *canoe*, *cochineal*, *hammock*, *hurricane*, *maize*, *pirogue* and *tobacco*.

According to Lepesa, the raise of Castilian as a literary language coincided with the decline of Catalan and it was due to the use of Castilian at the court and to the need for unity in internal and external communication. The Castilian language was also spoken in Portugal. Lepesa mentions the bilingualism of the early classic Portuguese writers such as the authors of the *Cancioneiro* de Resende, Gil Vicente, Camões and Rodrigo Lobo e Melo.

The modern Romance languages came of age during the Renaissance. To Lepesa, this was not just due to the new fashion of reshaping them according to the Greeks and Roman classics, but also because of the new fashion in that period of exulting nature and spontaneity. One of the works of the period worthy of mention is Juan de

Valdés 1535 book *Diálogo de la Lengua*. Just after the Renaissance period came the Golden Age of the Spanish literature, whose greatest work is undoubtedly *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes, characterized by familiar dialogues and a realistic prose.

After examining the work of other writers of the Golden Age of the Spanish literature, Lapesa moves on to Modern Spanish and the creation of the Spanish Royal Academy in 1713. The latter fomented the Spanish language through the publication of reference books, the republication of various other books including a sumptuous edition of *Don Quixote* and the stirring of orthographic reforms. The Academy continues to guide the evolution of Modern Spanish especially after the introduction of innumerable Gallicisms and Anglicisms in the 20th century.

The last chapters deal with the variations of Spanish in Spain and in the Americas and the rest of the world. After discussing the archaisms preserved in the Spanish spoken by the Jewish-Spanish communities of Morocco and other parts of Northern Africa and Turkey, who settled in these regions after their expulsion from Spain, Lapesa moves on to the Spanish that was taken to America. He discusses the indigenous influences in the American Spanish and produces a map of Central and South America showing the various linguistic regions based on their preferences regarding and the 'y-ism' in the pronunciation of certain consonants.

The American Spanish that resembles most the Spanish of Andalucía is that spoken in the Caribbean and the Antilles, which Lapesa attributes to the migrations that took place in the 16th century and their continued relations with the Canaries. In relation to the continent, the speech of the mountains is closer to that of Castilian than that of the Llanos and the coastal zones. American Spanish shows a divide between the cultivated and the uncultivated form of speech, but so does the Iberian Spanish. In spite of all the differences that the linguists have catalogued there is still a unity in the Spanish language of Iberia and the New World. The increased cultural exchange and communication that appeared in the latter part of the 20th century has staved off the fear of language split.