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**La enseñanza de idiomas en Venezuela y la investigación sobre la naturaleza del lenguaje**

**Dedicado a Rafael Herrera, fundador de los programas de entrenamiento de profesores de inglés en Venezuela**  
**Godsuno Chela-Flores**

### **Resumen**

En la primera parte de este trabajo se describen la situación y nivel académicos de los profesores de idiomas de Venezuela destacando las decisivas contribuciones de la Universidad del Zulia a su mejoramiento. Se subrayan las ventajas para la investigación del programa de maestría en Lingüística y Enseñanza del Lenguaje de esta universidad - único en su tipo- al agrupar y atender a profesores del idioma nativo y de un idioma extranjero, el inglés. En la segunda parte se aplica el modelo polisistémico natural - desarrollado por el autor para explicar fenómenos fónicos del español del Caribe - a problemas del inglés en sus etapas antigua y contemporánea. A estos procesos fonetológicos del inglés se les da una explicación unitaria siguiendo lineamientos cuasiuniversalistas.

**Palabras claves:** enseñanza, idioma nativo, idioma extranjero, polisistemicidad, fonología inglesa.

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**Foreign language teaching in Venezuela and the research into the nature of language**

**Dedicated to Rafael Herrera, founder of the English teacher-training programs in Venezuela.**

### **Abstract**

In the first part of this paper, the position and academic level of the Venezuelan foreign language teacher are described, underlining the decisive contributions the University of Zulia has made towards improving them. The advantages for research of the M.A. in Linguistics and Language Teaching of this university are analyzed; this graduate program is the only one in the country designed for both the native language teacher and the foreign language one. In the second part, the natural polysystemic model - developed by the author of this paper to explain phonetological phenomena of Caribbean Spanish - is applied to problems of both Old English and its

contemporary varieties. These processes are given a unitary explanation following the quasiuniversal principles and metaconditions of the polysystemic model.

**Key words:** teaching, native language, foreign language, polysystemicity, phonology.

Systematic English teaching officially begins with the founding of the English teacher training program at the Caracas Instituto Pedagógico in the middle 1940's under the vigorous leadership of Rafael Herrera, the first Venezuelan trained as an English teacher in the USA. After many years of solid work by the Pedagógico team and those of other teacher training institutions founded by the Ministry of Education, the University of Zulia gave the whole profession a new shape with a series of important academic events, the first of which was the approval of a university degree in Education with the possibility of majoring in English or French. The first students were accepted in 1970, opening the hitherto untapped human and material resources of the university world to the training of foreign language teachers. The approval of this program generated some controversy at the time, because no other university in the country offered it and its existence seemed to question the validity and / or the quality of the training given by the teacher training institutions; happily, this suspicion was soon laid to rest, since one of the main reasons for the new degree was the obvious fact that there was no other Higher Education institution offering anything like it in the Western region of Venezuela. The importance of the event lay in the opening of all sections of the Higher Education system for the training of English and French teachers. The original design for which the present author was responsible - gave a lot of room for the study of literature in the latter half of the degree as an effective means of (i) consolidating the linguistic structures acquired in the early stages; (ii) building as large a vocabulary as possible and (iii) providing an open window on the mind and culture of the peoples whose language was to be taught.<sup>1</sup>

Other universities have followed suit and there are now university degrees in English in the capital and the rest of the country. A private university in Caracas also offers a good program.

The second Zulia contribution was the organization of the first-ever national gathering of foreign language teachers in 1973 and the founding of the first Association of Foreign Language Teachers of Venezuela (A.P.L.E.V.). A second Congress took place in Maracaibo as well two years later and from then on, the national gatherings have been kept alive and in excellent health by the Instituto Pedagógico de Barquisimeto, today part of the first Pedagogical University of Venezuela. To these meetings, one must add the TESOL activities in recent years, providing another forum for our ideas and papers.

In 1979, the University of Zulia started the first M.A. program for English Language teachers.<sup>2</sup> This was a graduate program with a difference: it had the explicit aim of bringing them together with teachers of Spanish and seeing them both as linguists, i.e. specialists in the numerous and diverse dimensions of language. Other institutions of Higher Education have now started their graduate programs for English teachers: the Caracas Pedagógico, the Central University and the Simón Bolívar University among others.

In 1980, as a logical follow-up to the M.A. Program, Zulia became the stage for the First National Meeting of Linguists as defined above. The fifteenth of these meetings took place at the University of Zulia in 1996, which indicates that joint linguistic research by both L1 and L2 teachers is possible and healthy. However, as we shall see presently, not all is well in our realm, because the original aims of these Zulia initiatives - as I defined them in 1973, 1979 and 1989 - have not been fully attained and in some cases, have suffered some distortion.

For many years, the training of English teachers took place at the Caracas Pedagógico under the watchful eye of Professor Herrera and a dedicated group of pioneers selected and encouraged by him.<sup>3</sup>

There, in the white ccccl classrooms of the old building, the teaching of English became a profession, at least in theory, because to the man and woman in the street or to those in the corridors of power or in the groves of academe, that was no job for an intelligent youth... The truth was that outside the charmed circle of the Pedagógico, there was no conception of a teacher of English specifically trained for the job. One might say that was the situation back in the forties or in the benighted fifties, but unfortunately, this underestimation of the foreign language teacher has lasted, open or disguised, to the present day. Today, in these crisis-ridden nineties, it looks as if the situation has improved: we have teachers trained not only at the several teacher training colleges spread all over the country, but there is also a large number coming from the universities. We also have national gatherings where we can talk to each other and do our utmost to keep up to date. But underneath all this, there is a deeply ingrained opinion that teaching a foreign language is an occupation that does not require the exercising of one's mind to the same degree than teaching mathematics, biology or history.

This "black legend", as I called it in the inaugural lecture of the 1973 Congress (Chela-Flores, G. 1973), goes beyond our borders. In British universities, for instance, the requirements to join an M.A. in General Linguistics are higher than those for an M.A. in Applied Linguistics, our turf of course. Besides many applied Linguistics courses or programs are shorter (9 months sometimes, whereas the others never last less than 12 months) and do not require the writing of a thesis. If we look again within our borders, we notice that when graduate programs in Linguistics are planned, only teachers of the native language are considered. The programs for English teachers are just that, studies for foreign language instructors, and they are definitely not on the nature of language: they tend to concentrate on the world of the classroom and on the L2 acquisition process. This concern mostly with the surface is all right up to a certain degree, but does not give our teachers the broad and deep vision which is essential for the making of decisions about linguistic issues, i.e. their business!!!

In other words, foreign language teachers are viewed as consumers, never as producers. They are meant to use other people's ideas in order to organize their working world. This state of affairs leads to a much smaller number of papers from foreign language teachers being read in our national congresses and meetings, and although the scientific production of our colleagues abroad is essential reading to keep us up to date with what they are doing, our work must be stimulated and made public. Take, for example, what is happening with the National Meetings of Teachers and Researchers into Linguistics (ENDIL are the Spanish initials), which we started

in Zulia as a joint forum: they have been a success in that we have had fifteen of them to date, but our bleak reality is that L2 teachers have been pushed out or they have pushed themselves out, because the number of papers falls every year and is now below 10% of the total. Fortunately, the Barquisimeto conventions and the TESOL meetings still show good results. But the very fact that ENDIL Qn the one hand and Barquisimeto and TESOL Qn the other, go their separate ways, means, sadly enough, that a wonderful opportunity for the natural cross-fertilization between linguists is being lost.

The joint M.A. program offered only by the University of Zulia provides this common ground for teachers of English and Spanish, which leads to richer research results. An important feature is that a significant number of courses are common to both: teachers and students make an effort to understand the structure of the two languages and abundant data from both is handled. The Spanish teacher sees thus his own language from a new perspective, and his teaching becomes more illuminating and interesting, while the English teacher becomes a far more effective one since after all, Spanish is the native language of his students. The research coming out of this program is good, a good deal of it can be safely called quantitative with enough of the speculative dare that gives research its flavour of adventure.<sup>4</sup> All other programs of Linguistics in this country are exclusively for teachers of the mother tongue, and the few for English language teachers that are beginning to rear their heads only strengthen this linguistic apartheid. Our joint program proves that the academic background of the English teacher not only qualifies him or her for qualitative research into the nature of language, but in fact provides the best background. English teachers have the definite advantage of having access to practically all linguistic papers and reports, because English is the language of science, but more relevantly, they know another language, which in the very long struggle to understand the mysteries of human communication is a definite advantage.

A word or two on the kind of research graduate programs in Linguistics are likely and expected to produce. Esa Itkonen 1980, points out that

“The significant linguistic variables are of ... a qualitative nature, i.e., their values cannot be ordered on a quantitative scale. The only quantitative aspect of such variables consists in their frequencies of occurrence” (p.353).

Unlike the variables in the natural sciences, the object of our study is inherently qualitative, and therefore research that concentrates on accumulating information on the frequency of the exponents of the variables runs the obvious risk of triviality, or in the best of cases, does nothing more than rearrange of the data. Allow me to give you now my favorite example of the triviality brought on by the almost child-like devotion some researchers give to quantification and although it is not initially about language teaching, there was an attempt to reproduce this research scheme in one of our MA. Student proposals. A PhD thesis approved by examiners of Andrews University, Texas, USA (Ebling, 1979), presented the results of the comparison between a 1681 Portuguese version of the Bible -the Almeida translation and a simplified contemporary one prepared in 1973. The simplified version followed the pattern set by a 1966 English version done under the supervision of linguists of the stature of Eugene Nida. The researcher gathered masses of data on the comprehension levels of the two versions attained

by Rio de Janeiro school children. Would you be surprised if I informed you that (a) all children understood the simplified version better; (b) that there are significant differences between the results obtained by the eleventh grade informants and those of the eighth graders and (c) the results of the reading of the Almeida version by the eleventh grade children were higher than those of the eighth grade ones performing the same task. These were the “earth shattering” results that led the researcher to be rewarded with a PhD degree. Quite obviously, the research should not have stopped at the quantifying stage, for this was a linguistic inquiry and the mere accumulation of figures leads nowhere, however sophisticated the quantifying mechanism may be.

In our field, a separate graduate program for teachers of English runs the considerable risk of surrendering itself to quantitative research because of the idea that they should not be taxed with fiendish theoretical pursuits. I must hasten to add that in linguistic research today there is an insidious temptation present in sociolinguistics because of its strong quantitative leaning: a good deal of it drowns itself in numbers with no equivalent push forward in the generation of knowledge.

Let's move now to non-trivial matters in this common ground of English and Spanish. It is definitely non-trivial to look for explanations for large chunks of the phonetics of English, which although described in detail, quantified and incorporated into an English Language teaching methods, have not been given a principled, qualitative treatment yet. For example, take A.C. Gimson's successor of Daniel Jones, the phonetician's phonetician - and his detailed description of Received Pronunciation: he provides a useful section on Variations of Place (pp.290-293 in the 1980 edition of “An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English”) with data on the instability of final alveolars. He lists the numerous and diverse misfortunes that befall this select group of consonants when they happen to be caught unawares in word final position. It, d, n, s, z/ in word final position suffer the following indignities:

### **1. Assimilation to the next consonant**

[ðæp pɛn] 'that pen'; [ðæk kʌp] 'that cup'; [gʊbbɔɪ] 'good boy'

[gʊm mɔːnɪŋ] 'good morning'; [ju kən hæm maɪn] 'you can have mine'

[tɛŋ gɜ: lz] 'ten girls'; [ðɪ ʃɒp] 'the shop'; [ðɪʃ jɜ] 'this year'

## 2. Coalescence with /j/ (all except / n /)

/t / + /j / - [wɒtʃu wɒnt] 'What you want?'; /d / + /j / - [wʊdʒu] 'Would you?'

/s / + /j / - [ɪŋ keɪʃni:d ɪt] 'in case you need it'; /z / + /j /

- [hæʒɔ:lɛtə kʌm] 'Has your letter come?'

## 3. Elision

[neks deɪ] 'next day'; [lef tɜ: n] 'left turn'; [mæʃ pətetəʊz] 'mashed potatoes'

[mʌs gəʊ] 'must go'; and all the regular past tenses **worked, named, called, etc.**

These alveolars are most definitely accident-prone: but we are left in the dark as to the reasons why these consonants and no others exhibit that peculiar behaviour. There are several answers to that query, but one principled explanation may have been provided by work resulting from the cross-fertilization I have been talking about. In Chela-Flores, G. 1986, 1994, 1995, etc., a model of the behaviour of Spanish consonants based on Caribbean Spanish data is presented. This model predicts that [÷ANT] consonants in post-vocalic positions are marked segments and that, therefore, they are more likely to either become [-ANTERIOR], which is what is happening in our type of Spanish,

/s/ --> [h]  
/n/ --> [ŋ]

/d/ -->  $\left. \begin{array}{c} [g] \\ [ʔ] \\ [∅] \end{array} \right\}$  etc

or become rather unstable, as in the English example mentioned before and also in Spanish with frequent lambdacism (l r / - l), rhotacism (/l- r) or the appearance of mixed varieties. At the same time, the polysystemic model provides a satisfactory explanation of the frequent glottalization of consonants in English. Word final, (i.e. post-nuclear) fortis plosives / p, t, k, /

and also /t, d, n, / may be reinforced by a glottal stop which occurs simultaneously with the mouth closure or slightly before it

/p/ leap, rip, sharp, cup, etc.  
/t/ feet, bit, cart, cut, etc.  
/k/ leak, lick, lark, luck, etc.

(Gimson, 1980, pp.170)

Another example of glottalization occurs when RP speakers replace word or morpheme final / p, t, k, / by [ʔ] when a consonant follows. Such a glottal closure often replaces / t /

when the following consonant is homorganic, i.e. /t/, /d/, /tʃ/ or /dʒ/ as in that table, get down, that chair, great joke or /n/ in witness, not down, etc. (Gimson, 1980, p.170).

The glottal stop of course, is an unmarked member of the postnuclear system, since it is [-ANTERIOR], and within the polysystemic approach, its occurrence is to be expected in the above contexts.

Another ever-present and over-described, but not explained, phenomenon of English phonetics is the “darkening” or velarizing of postnuclear /ɪ/ and its frequent disappearance. In many varieties of English, this /ɪ/ is velarized to [ɨ] mili, feil, buik, heath, etc. and it also disappears altogether. This disappearance seems unavoidable, since the raising of the back of the tongue towards the velum weakens the tongue-tip contact. In the series talk, chalk, walk, etc. the elision is historically established after the vowel /o/, and so is the trio could, would, should after /u/. However, this lateral elision is also found in modern spoken English, even in the slow colloquial style, words beginning with [l]-: almost, always, already, altogether, etc. are commonly and frequently pronounced without /l/ following /o/. But the process has expanded as Gillian Brown (1978, p.64) and others have shown:

[ˈrɔ: ˈgrɪn ˈdʒækɪts] ‘Royal Green Jackets’ < [ˈrɔ: ʒəl ...]  
[ˈsɜːtəni] ‘certainly’ < [ˈsɜːtəni lɪ]  
[kʌmiˈneɪtɪd] ‘culminated’ < [kʌmiˈneɪtɪd]

These phonetic details about /ɪ/ are well known, but no attempt at an explanation appears in any of the published papers and books by Daniel Jones, A.C. Gimson, Gillian Brown etc. Within the proposal I am making, it is predictable and natural that a front lateral - an alveolar again - in a postvocalic position, should become a back sound.

Why are there so many affricates in English? The language exhibits no less than four: /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /tr/, /dr/ and in some dialects even /ts/ and /dz/ as in ‘time’ and ‘day’. The reason seems to lie in the fact that an affricate is one of the strongest sounds in all scales of segmental strength and they are all [+ANTERIOR]: the prenuclear system in our proposal “prefers” or “goes for” both criteria. In addition to this, in the articulatory setting of English, strong articulatory contact is common, favouring affricates. As an additional confirmation of the validity of the polysystemic approach to this question, one does not notice any tendency towards affrication of postvocalic /t/ or /d/ as a mirror image of what is happening with the same sounds in word initial positions.

Aspiration of fortis stops is just what one would expect of the prenuclear system, since this is a strengthening process; and of course, it does not normally take place in postvocalic positions.

Take now what seems to be an obvious counterexample to my approach: English / h 1. This is a sound that was far more frequent in the early stages of the language and Old English data presents us with what seems a whole bunch of marked consonant clusters: hl, hr, hn, hw (spehling evidence) in words such as hláford 'lord', hran 'whale', hnutu 'nut' and hwiil 'while'. These spehling clusters may have been pronounced in any of the three following ways (or all three at one time or another):

(a) [hl, hr, hn, hw] .

(b) [l̥, r̥, n̥, w̥]

(c) [xl, xr, xn, xw]

The evidence is confusing: it may have been that the velar cluster was the very earliest pronunciation and although the Old English specialists say they do not know why or when it was lost (see Clark, J.W., 1967, p.60), it seems to me that the marked character of a velar in the prenuclear position was the factor that weakened the cluster to a devoicing of the four sonorants, which in turn lost their h-quality by the early Middle English period, i.e. the XIV century or thereabouts (see Jespersen, O. 1965, vol.I, pp.55 and 57). The velar cluster had two things working against it: it was in the wrong system - a [+BACK] sound in the prenuclear position - and a consonant combination, h+[SONORANT] (cf. tr, dr, kr, gr which are frequent in English), which does not lend itself to prenuclear clusters. The presence of devoiced sonorants (or h-clusters) was not likely to last since sonorants are normally voiced, so this non-anterior glottal element in a prenuclear position disappeared without trace.

The initial / h / left in English from its O.E. heritage, occurs only before vowels: high, horse, help etc. (although some very frequent items such as [hit] 'it' were lost by the early Middle English period (Jespersen, O, op. cit., p.60), where the speaker probably interprets it as a voiceless onset of the vowel and in a number of borrowings from French, some of Germanic origin (hardly, haste, herald, etc.) and many of Latin origin (herb, horror, habit, hospital, humour, etc.). As the prenuclear Latin / h / had disappeared from Romance languages - after all it was in marked position - by the time these words entered the language, the hesitation shown over the pronunciation of / h / by English speakers in modern times, reflects the fact that these lexical guests carried an h-less pronunciation. In fact, popular speech, free from normative pressures gives in to the natural tendency not to pronounce [initial / h / in have, has, had (e.g. 'I could have spoken before' [ai kd v spukn bifo]), pronouns or pronominal adjectives or in the smallish group, accepted by purists and formed by items such as hour, honest, honour, heir, heiress. In some cases, the communicational need to maintain minimal pairs (witch - which; wine - whine; whet - wet, etc.) brings it back in although the persistence of prenuclear / h / in the / hw / - / h / opposition in American and Scottish dialects may be due to the fact that the number words entering language with [initial / w / is much smaller than the number of those beginning with / n, r, ll.

In conclusion, the dropping of prenuclear / h / , characterized by many teachers as vulgar, is no more than a spontaneous phenomenon coming from below - if I may borrow a term from sociolinguistics - occurring as social pressure or self-monitoring decreases.

One more example: / 'j / in English as in most languages (with the exception of Chinese and a few others), occurs only in postvocalic position; its overwhelming presence in that position in Caribbean Spanish only confirms its rightful place as an unmarked member of the postnuclear system.

We have tried not only to find explanations for English phonetic phenomena, but we have also linked them to Spanish ones, which on the surface seem remote and unconnected. Joint programs of the type we have defended in this paper, open up paths which elevate the English language teacher to the level of research that delves deeply into the intricate nature of language.

After all, everyone who deals with language, be it from the viewpoint of the foreign tongue or from the native one, is trying to solve the same elemental, perennial equation

Horno sapiens = Horno loquens + Horno ludens

which is the same as saying that Man's wisdom is a judicious mixture of his God-given gift of speech and his ever present playfulness.

#### NOTES:

1. This literary component has now been reduced to a minimum, which is not healthy, since - just to take an example - nowadays there is a consensus on the absolute priority of vocabulary building (over aspects such as the characteristics of the sound input) as the basis of auditory comprehension. Kelly 1991 - and others - point out that top down processing is the key aspect here: the reading and analysis of literary texts is a time-proven means of tackling this side of our teacher training. A curious situation has developed in the planning of degrees for L1 and L2 teachers; the first emphasize literature to the detriment of linguistic analysis and the second do the opposite. However, the recognition of at least part of the trouble, has brought into being an interesting M.A. Program in the teaching of Literature as part of the training of English Language teachers at the Caracas Pedagógico.

2. See Chela-Flores, G. (1980).

3. Professor Herrera became the first Honorary Member of the Association of Foreign Language Teachers of Venezuela (A.P.L.E.V.) in March 1974.

4. In Chela-Flores 1992, I examine the question of the productivity of these graduate programs.

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