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Hispania 97.3 (2014): 360–61

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The Spanish language has been present in California since the eighteenth century. Since then, it has evolved from a migrant language to a vernacular variety of Spanish: a new dialect in the making (Parodi 2011). I have compiled a 35,000-word corpus of mostly previously unpublished manuscript documents that I have transcribed, which shows that there was a vernacular variety of Spanish in California in the nineteenth century. Previous studies, such as those by Espinosa (1940), Blanco (1971), and Moyna (2009), point in the same direction. I refer to this variety as Californio Spanish, with the same term that its speakers used to refer to themselves in the nineteenth century.

The first document of the corpus is from 1804, and the last one is dated 1886. The documents, which belong to The Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley and to UC Irvine, represent the Spanish spoken in the California area during the nineteenth century. From judicial proceedings and land grants to personal letters and shopping lists, I have included a wide array of documents and authors in the corpus, in order to cover as many sociolinguistic variables and pragmatic registers as possible.

In addition to documenting the existence of the Californio dialect, the corpus shows a relationship with contemporary Spanish in California. Probably the most salient feature of Los Angeles Vernacular Spanish, at least considered from a mainstream point of view, is contact phenomena, such as semantic extensions, borrowings, and code-switching fragments of different kinds. All three were already present in nineteenth-century Californio Spanish, as we can observe in the following examples (emphasis added).

(1) nuestros padres fueron los verdaderos pioneros de este pais privilegiado
(2) como testigo ocular que he sido puedo asegurar que Nueva Helvetia fue objeto de un esqueteo formidable
(3) De allí hacían sus excursiones al campo diariamente en busca de rezos de la Mission.
(qtd. in Lamar Prieto 11–19)

The above examples resemble contact phenomena that have been documented in contemporary Spanish in California as well. In fact, some of the examples, such as (4), are self-explanatory in regards to their continuity in contemporary Spanish in California.

(4) Procura ver si los taxes de Pudenciana no están pagados, págalos . . . no sea que la vayan a rematar. (qtd. in Lamar Prieto 297)

These examples, among others, reveal how many words and expressions that are considered “recent corruptions” or the result of recent linguistic accommodation have, however, a very
extensive history in the community. Contact phenomena, then, were an element of the Californio dialect less than two decades after the annexation. These phenomena are also vividly present in contemporary Los Angeles Vernacular Spanish. It means no more—or no less—than a dialectal history of one hundred and fifty years. Consequently, Spanish-English code switching is not “something new” that appears in contemporary times, but an inherent feature of the Spanish language spoken in Southern California and, as such, provides the dialect with a historical dimension that merits further study and academic recognition.

WORKS CITED