Difficulties in the Simultaneous Study of Spanish and Portuguese

Yakov Malkiel


Stable URL: http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0026-7902%28194112%2925%3A11%3C853%3ADITSSO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-R

*The Modern Language Journal* is currently published by National Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations.
Difficulties in the Simultaneous Study of Spanish and Portuguese

YAKOV MALKIEL
New York City

(Author's summary.—Certain difficulties arising from a simultaneous study of the two related languages, and suggestions, based on actual teaching experience, as to how they can be most effectively eliminated.)

If we consider the renown of the Castilian culture and the immense facilities accorded to Spanish studies in this country, knowledge of Portuguese is by no means sufficiently widespread in the United States. Nevertheless, no one can ignore the fact that Brazil covers half the area of South America. It has in recent years become an increasingly influential factor in this hemisphere and is sure to be more so in the future. In view of the war in Europe we may easily expect that the links uniting the republics of the New World will gain in strength and the spiritual intercourse between the nations will be gradually stimulated. In that eventuality, Portuguese will be regarded as a language of major importance within a comparatively short time, and attempts will be doubtless made to introduce it in American colleges or even high schools.

In view of the prospect of this situation, it is well to clarify a source of possible misunderstanding. In the first place, Portuguese, as a linguistic unit, is by no means subordinate to Spanish, nor is Brazil substantially inferior, in respect to territorial extent, population and economic resources, to the rest of South America. Yet scholars and teachers ought to emphasize this elementary fact over and over again, because, so far, one can still hear the contrary assertions defended by serious people. The alleged numerical preponderance of Spanish speaking states must be pointed out as a dubious argument. The former Spanish empire immediately disintegrated after the War of Independence, whereas the originally Portuguese dominion continued to hold together. The idea that the two idioms, aside from their expansion, are on the same level and, both by their descent and intrinsic value, equal in rank, is too familiar to the readers of this review to need special emphasis.

So the first step should be to arouse a general interest in the language by brushing aside preconceived opinions. When that is accomplished, there remain some technical questions to be settled as precisely as possible. The important fact is that those who know Portuguese cannot afford to ignore learning Spanish. The two languages ought to be studied simultaneously, but a certain priority may be granted to Spanish on the ground that it is an easier idiom and possesses an older scholastic tradition. In other words, the problem consists in inducing pupils already acquainted with, and having some practice in Spanish, to learn the sister language without endangering
their previous acquirements. For every one will agree on the danger that even a thoroughly cultured and mature person inevitably runs into in learning two languages so closely akin to each other.

Precisely what constitutes this disadvantage? If a person happens to discover, in two separate languages, perfectly parallel series of words designating a great many everyday objects and general concepts such as: house (casa), table (mesa), dresser (armario), country (pais), wheat (trigo), month (mes), hour (hora), uncle (tio), friend (amigo), blue (azul), green (verde), to like (querer), to eat (comer), to ask (pedir), to sleep (dormir). . . , he naturally feels inclined to put up a kind of equation between the two languages. He gladly admits the existence of slight phonetic variations, e.g., ciudad — cidade; contento — contente. He goes so far as to discover the effectiveness of a “law” in the alternation of h-/f-, ll-/ch- (hierro—ferro, farina—farinha; llegar—chegar, llave—chave), but, then, he is quite certain to be puzzled and to shrink back from any unexpected deviation, incongruence and “irregularity.” For “window” (ventana), in Spanish, there is no corresponding word in Portuguese, not even a theoretical ventá, which, at best, he might feel tempted to reconstruct. If the student has no bases for easy and reliable guessing, disappointment and lack of interest are almost sure to ensue. Thus the first favorable impression of the beginner that everything in the new linguistic atmosphere appears so familiar, so self-understood, so easy to treasure up in one’s memory, is almost certain to be counterbalanced by a sad experience and to give way to despair. The very close kinship of two systems is a permanent hindrance to a light, clear, unencumbered flow of speech in either of them. Any hope of grasping, picking up words or constructions by mere hearing is henceforth doomed to vanish. Memory, permanently impressed by very similar, but often contradictory words refuses to assist and unburden the student’s mind. On the contrary, it must be expected to exert a heavy pressure on the thinking power and to misguide the victim like a compass needle in oscillation. The farther the studies seem to advance, the less solid and well-grounded the pupil’s actual knowledge turns out to be, the more troublesome and painstaking will be also any attempt, on his part, at clearly differentiating and delimiting, in his own mental capacity, two systems fatally entangled. No good can come of such a confusion, all the more so since the difficulties are known to rise rapidly and become more and more bewildering.

Just imagine that a word meaning “brush” changes into a “broom” (escoba); that the famous bull-fight is transformed into a horse-race (corrida); that there is a confusion between “to try” and “to seek” (procurar), “to accord” and “to awake” (acordar), “red” and “pink” (rojo); that a “talk” is in Portuguese conversa, an “exaggeration”: exagero, a “pronunciation”: pronuncia, a “granting”: outorga, which we are safe to believe might have been derived in Spanish by means of exactly the same endings, but, for some reason or other, are expressed by: conversación, exageración, pro-
To put the entire situation in its proper setting, let us imagine a clever average child who simultaneously starts learning two languages with so profound a gap to separate them as Russian and Turkish. At the very outset, he is sure to be overwhelmed by the immense diversity of word material and grammatical resources. He will suffer from what we may be permitted to call a kind of linguistic double-sight. But gradually he will manage to disentangle himself, to find out paths that will enable him clearly to overlook the two distinct fields and, finally, master his former perplexity, so as to speak and write both languages with perfect lucidity. This is decidedly in contrast to his fellow-student, who is likely to succumb in his endeavor to learn Spanish and Portuguese with equal proficiency.

Now that we have seen the danger of a simultaneous study, let us venture to suggest how to avert or, at least, mitigate it. In doing so, we only summarize some conclusions drawn from personal experience, having had an opportunity of teaching these two languages to more or less the same audience. The main idea is to create a convenient separation. Let us see from what points of view we may achieve this objective.

1. From the standpoint of succession: Spanish must be spoken with great ease by the student before he is brought into contact with the first Portuguese word. It is important that, at this moment, he should speak the former idiom, to a certain degree, mechanically, so as to avoid burdening his mind with double the load of the lexical and grammatical content.

2. As to intensity, when elements of the second language begin penetrating a mental field originally reserved for the first alone, relaxing the studies of Spanish would result in a catastrophe. On the contrary, they must be intensified by all means. Time for Portuguese must on no account be saved at the cost of Spanish, if the latter is not to be quickly overshadowed and the once familiar forms superseded by others, that are more impressive.

3. As to method, Spanish must be taught, as usual, systematically, proceeding from easy to complex texts. Students of Portuguese must be expected to derive the new idiom from those learned before. Theirs will be, of necessity, a mainly comparative and critical method. They must try to conjecture, to imagine, to adjust, to infer—briefly, to interpret a difficult text from the very beginning, to plunge into the new medium. This will conform perfectly well with their more advanced age.

4. Finally, from the viewpoint of the goal of the studies: as an equal degree of proficiency is impossible, knowledge of Spanish must be, from the first, active; that of Portuguese, passive. An educated person able to understand a Portuguese newspaper or book is certain to learn the colloquial language, as soon as a real necessity will present itself. An additional sug-
gestion: it is highly desirable that the same teacher should take charge of the two disciplines, so as to be ready, at any time, to clear away difficulties and confusions.

The proposed differentiation will make the student keener in his linguistic understanding, rouse his interests and heighten his impressionability for idiomatic nuances in the same measure as it will help to exclude any prejudicial collision of kindred elements. It tries to conciliate the demands of modern life with the conditions of reasonable pedagogy.