

## PODCAST 30 The Magic of Language - Friday, February 1, 2019

Welcome to 30 Brave Minutes, a podcast of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. In 30 Brave Minutes we'll give you something interesting to think about. The topic for today is the magic of language. Joining the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences Jeff Frederick are Diana Lee, Milagros López-Fred and Richard Vela from the Department of English, Theater, and Foreign Languages, and Chris Woolley from the Department of History. Now get ready for 30 Brave Minutes.

FREDERICK: As a scholar who writes, speaks, and teaches about the American South, I have been drawn to language for some time. Everybody knows that for those of us who have spent a lifetime in the South, words matter. If you are from these parts, you don't order a bottle of pop or a can of soda -- this can lead to what professional experts call a breakdown in communication. In half of the South you ask for a Coke; in much of North Carolina, particularly up New Bern way, you might want to call for a Pepsi, but never for a pop. When certain words come into our southern ears, we have a way of converting them involuntarily into something else. For example, if we hear "a quarter inch of ice might fall on nearby roads overnight," we convert that into "stop what you are doing and buy every loaf of bread and gallon of milk you can find." If we hear "As a result of the hurricane, the Waffle House is temporarily closing," those words turn into something like "the end of time is at hand." If we say "Bless your heart" check to see if we are shaking our head when we say it. That will tell you exactly what we mean.

For southerners, our words, accents, diction, and language are all conditional on time, place, occupation, and meaning. I have studied other tri-racial areas like Mobile, Alabama, Tampa, Florida, and New Orleans, Louisiana, but the words and language that form the daily dialogue of Robeson County, North Carolina, are unlike any other I have come across. The procurement of fast food in a drive through line or at a counter in this area is rarely if ever completed without the use of the words "baby," or "Bo," or sometimes "Pa"- terms of endearment that aren't quite used the same way beyond these parts.

I am equally certain that regionalism, diction, word choices, accents, class, gender, race, and nationalism must also affect other languages. Across the globe over 400 million native Spanish speakers exist, but they don't all speak the language in exactly the same way. As the second most spoken language in the world Spanish is rich and textured, nuanced, and occasionally idiosyncratic. It is full of reference points used in written and spoken forms that add splendor and majesty to the spoken word. As a southerner, I have a pretty good shot at figuring out if a person is from Mississippi and not Kansas, and, more to the point, from the western North Carolina Mountains and not lower Alabama. Is it the same with Spanish? Mexico is but one example, and has 31 states. How similar and how different are the accents, word usages, and lexicon from one end of the country to another? Do experienced travelers and scholars of the language innately know whether someone is from the State of Chihuahua and not the State of Morelos? And what about national boundaries? How similar is the Spanish spoken or written in El Salvador, for example, to what is used in say, Venezuela, where Spanish is the most common language, even if some 3 dozen other languages are part of the culture?

To find out some answers about Spanish, spoken, written, and otherwise, I assembled an all-star panel of scholars who work with the language in its many different forms. Joining me today are Diana Lee, Milagros López-Fred, Richard Vela, and Chris Wooley. And with apologies to this great panel, to the Royal Spanish Academy, and to our listeners for my own rudimentary and minimal Spanish skills, let's learn about Spanish, a beautiful, phonetic, Romance language with some fascinating mysteries.

Let's start with a baseline. When and where and how did you learn Spanish and what are some obvious comparisons and contrasts with English?

LEE: Well, I learned Spanish in high school. I started Spanish 1 at fourteen and I really liked...

FREDERICK: Do we have a picture of that somewhere?

LEE: Probably, but you don't want to see it. Believe me. I really fell in love with the idea of studying languages. There is something mathematical about it and also artistic. So, I decided at the young age of 18 to study at the University and have my major in Spanish. My friends teased me and they said "oh, why would you study Spanish?" And now all of them in their thirties are jealous and are learning Spanish with Rosetta Stone. But when I went to University, I studied Spanish and then I spent a year abroad in Buenos Aires, Argentina and that is basically how I solidified my language skills, and then doing a PhD in Spanish also helps a bit with regards to learning. In terms of comparisons and contrasting elements I think one of the things that I like most about Spanish is, they say this a lot, English is a very scientific mathematical language, and Spanish is a language that is much better created to express emotion. And so when they say actually in a lot of places, Spanish is the language of prayer and I think there's a lot that can be said about that but I'll pass the mic.

WOOLLEY: All right. Yeah. My story is somewhat similar. I started studying Spanish in high school. I thought it was frustrating and fascinating and all those things so I kept studying it and then, you know, I'm a historian, so I went and studied history and it was a logical thing to study the Spanish speaking world. So when I went to graduate school I decided I wanted to study Latin American history. I lived in Costa Rica for a while ostensibly studying Spanish, although there was a hammock on the beach there. (Everyone laughs.)

FREDERICK: I know there's a picture of that.

WOOLLEY: Again, I can neither confirm nor deny that. I would say the bulk of my Spanish knowledge comes from studying to read primary documents. We can talk about that later. And also I lived in Mexico for quite a while. I lived in Mexico City for almost two years at one point and I've been back several times since then. So my Spanish is very Central Mexican, which as we're going to discuss later, I'm sure, is not the same as other places in Mexico and certainly in Latin America.

FREDERICK: Did both of your confidence levels increase living among native speakers?

WOOLLEY: In my case, I'll say yes because eventually you get to a point where you just don't care if you embarrass yourself. And once you get to that point it is where you're really free to just sort of... and in my experience Mexicans are just really great about helping you and helping you say the right thing but not judging you too harshly, which made it easier for me.

LEE: Argentines are not as understanding and nice. I lived with a family and at some point, around month five, I realized that when she was knocking on my door to wake me up, I wasn't even thinking about it. It was just the language we communicated in.

FREDERICK: Milagros, what about you?

LOPEZ-FRED: Yes. Well Spanish was my first language, so I learned it at home with my parents. Even though I was born here in the United States, but I grew up in Puerto Rico. I'm fluent in Spanish and I will say in English, too.

FREDERICK: Did you find yourself growing up speaking it needing to translate it from the way others were speaking it and from the way Americans were speaking it?

LOPEZ-FRED: Okay, not really. Okay. I mean, over the years you tend to learn more about how the language functions either, you know, in English or Spanish and sometimes you realize okay, I'm thinking in English or I'm thinking in Spanish and sometimes it's a little bit, you know, where do I draw the line? But I mean it came out easy. I mean, yes, I learned Spanish. I mean, you know, at home, so that was the easy way I will say for me growing up.

FREDERICK: What about you, Richard?

VELA: Actually in two phases. I was born in Los Angeles and obviously most of the people that lived around us spoke English actually, but my grandmother and my dad's brothers, my uncles, lived there and they spoke Spanish for the most part. So I had a little bit from there. When I went to kindergarten in Los Angeles, it was all in English. When I came back to Texas, though, all my family there spoke Spanish as the first language. So I had to improve considerably to be able to communicate. So, you know, first grade, you know started in not a school at all. And my grandmother on my mother's side, there in Texas was very insistent that we learn a particular kind of thing and all that, so she would go through language drills with us. So *A, E, I, O, U, El burro sabe más que tú.* (Everyone laughs.) *Erre con erre cigarro, erre con erre barril. Rápido corren los carros, los carros del ferrocarril.* And it is to learn how to roll the 'r' for example, or how to learn the vowels and all that sort of thing. And then in high school I took Spanish. Everybody did. And in college I took some. I taught Spanish in fifth grade my first year teaching, and then substituted occasionally when somebody was sick back in the first years when I came here.

FREDERICK: So some of you traffic more in the written word, and some of you may be more in the spoken word, and some of you do an equal amount of both. Diana brought up a really interesting point about sort of the splendor of the language in its spoken form. Does it lose some of that power and some of that poetry when it's written or when you're reading it? Talk about that a little bit.

LEE: I don't think it loses any of its power. In fact I actually love reading poetry in Spanish. I think it's really... there's something about it. I prefer poetry in Spanish to poetry in English, but I didn't always feel that way. It wasn't until I realized how nuanced the language was and one word can mean so many different things. When I was just learning Spanish. It frustrated me immensely. But the one thing that is interesting about knowing a different language is how much it pushes you to know your own language. So I began to realize how nuanced English is. The word 'the', for instance. Do you know how many different uses we have in English that we take for granted? And then, in Spanish, even the word 'the' is not always used in the same context. So it's an interesting thing. I personally think that the oral language and the written language are both beautiful.

VELA: Let me mention something about a course that I teach: Latino Literature. The generalization that a lot of Americans have is that everybody who is Spanish speaking is speaking a "Mexican" and the course as I teach it divides up into Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Dominican because those have the richest literature in English. It's a course with literature in English, but from Spanish writers. The thing that happens is that there's a lot of things that they say in that, that will also be words in Spanish, so they have to kind of understand both, and they can see differences between the issues that are important for Cubans, for example, versus the issues that are from Cuban from Mexican, versus the issues that are interesting and important for Dominicans, and all. And so there's a lot of mix of that kind, and what I do find in that course is that I have a lot of people who are, in effect, third-generation. Grandparents spoke Spanish, parents spoke English-Spanish, and they grew up speaking only English. So they are often people who are Latino background but who don't speak Spanish, and this course, sometimes, reconnects them in ways that they have told me they didn't expect it to.

FREDERICK: So what are the ways when you were dealing with someone who's either very elementary in their speaking or their reading of the language or you're trying to communicate a text that you've uncovered to someone who doesn't really get it? How do you translate how you're trying to get them to think for someone who's used to only thinking in one language?

LEE: I think Milagros should take that question.

LÓPEZ-FRED: Okay. Well the point is we have a lot of students that, when they come even to Spanish 1 class, you know, first name and last name is in Spanish, but they don't know a word, or they're able to recognize some of the words that we're saying when we speak or we read, but you have to get to the lowest level to explain them or find cognates so that way they can make that association to see what is it that we're trying to say in a sentence and all that. And yes, sometimes I'm thinking in Spanish and in English, so we have to like mainly train our mind and help these students to realize that transition needs to be made in order for them to make sense of what they're reading or speaking. And then when they start doing that they realize, "Okay. I remember this. My mom says this all the time," or "my parents say this at home." So I can get, you know, to know and make sense of what we're saying, and say "okay, that is what they meant, but they never explained this to me." So that's where our job as a teacher, as a professor, is, you know, like okay, you know, I'm getting you where you need to be in order for you to understand how the language works.

FREDERICK: If you hear someone speaking a language, do you have an approximation of where you think they're from? Is it similar to the way it is with English in this country?

LÓPEZ-FRED: Yes. We do. Especially, I'm from Puerto Rico and we tend to cut many of the words. We do not pronounce the S's, we change the L for the N or for the R, and so I can tell if they are from Puerto Rico, from Cuba, República Dominicana. And then sometimes they can trick you because, you know, the accent is mixed with the English, so it's hard to tell, but I can tell. And it's the same in Puerto Rico, like in other Spanish-speaking countries. It depends what area they're coming from and I can identify if they are coming from the north, from the south, or from the center of the island. So I think it's about the same as in the United States.

FREDERICK: Chris, you lived in Mexico. Is it easy enough to figure out, well, that person's from Northern Mexico, or Southern? Or, from the city, or that's from the rural?

WOOLLEY: I can identify central Mexico, you know, Mexico City, pretty readily, both by vocabulary and by what they mean. Because I've spent so much time there I recognize very quickly if someone is from there. And I'm not as intuitive as to tell differences between one part of Northwestern Mexico, or the Dominican Republic, or something, but to tell the difference between someone who's from Mexico and someone who is from Cuba is very easy. For one, I can understand the person from Mexico, and not the person from Cuba. (Everyone laughs) That's one thing, but there is a question of vocabulary, too. A lot of the vocabulary of Mexico is very unique from the indigenous languages and it is used quite regularly in Mexican Spanish and it has no meaning anywhere else.

FREDERICK: And laced with cultural references, as well?

WOOLLEY: Oh sure. I can give you an example. For the longest time I thought the Spanish word for a drinking straw was a popote. Have you heard that word? Anywhere but Mexico, the word is pajita. I remember using that in other places and they just look at you like, "what are you talking about?" It comes from the Nahuatl language. A lot of vocabulary does.

VELA: Yeah, we use that.

LEE: One of the things that was very different for us was that in the southern cone, it was very recognizably it's very recognizably different from Mexico, from Spain. So I kind of work more in broad strokes when it comes to accents. I wouldn't be able to tell you what part of Puerto Rico somebody's from but I can definitely identify, are they from Argentina. And Argentines have a couple of different linguistic pronunciations that they use so they, for instance, if you wanted to say, my name is, or if you wanted to say I'm called me llamo Diana, which is straightforward in Spanish, but in Argentina is very me "ssshhhhamo" Diana. They have this ssshhh that they call. Then in Spain it's a lot different because they pronounce their z's and their c's often with a lisp and I can tell when someone is from Spain. I definitely can tell when someone's from Argentina and I get so excited to see and to hear the ssshhhsss in my ear.

VELA: The rhythm and vocabulary are the things that I notice most. I've been in Cuba and in Honduras, as well as Mexico and certainly the things that they talk about are different, you

know, especially foods and things like that, as you were suggesting. And then, the rhythm of it. In Cuba it was a very, very different rhythm and when I spoke I could pass for being someone from Mexico, who knew how to speak, but I was in no way able to approximate anything like what Cubans do.

FREDERICK: Can you all pick up the distinctions when you read text the same way as with your ear?

LEE: Only so much in terms of vocabulary. You cannot read a text and say that person's from Cuba, that person's from Argentina, or wherever.

CUMMINGS: This is Chancellor Robin Cummings and I want to thank you for listening to 30 Brave Minutes. Our faculty and students provide expertise, energy, and passion driving our region forward. Our commitment to Southeastern North Carolina has never been stronger through our teaching, our research, and our community outreach. I want to encourage you to consider making a tax-deductible contribution to the College of Arts and Sciences at University of North Carolina at Pembroke. With your help we will continue our impact for generations to come. You can donate online at [uncp.edu/give](http://uncp.edu/give). Thanks again, for listening. Now back to more 30 Brave Minutes.

FREDERICK: What's unique about the way Americans write Spanish? Are we any better or any worse at picking up the language?

VELA: I grew up on the border and there's some strange mispronunciation so that the minute someone opens their mouth, you know, "Okay, it's going to go..."

WOOLLEY: My mother majored in Romance Languages in college and so, she knows a bit of Spanish. When they go to a Mexican restaurant, my dad will make a point of ordering arrows con polo, just to make her uncomfortable. (Everyone laughs.)

VELA: It's the same thing.

FREDERICK: And all of you work in texts, many of them from different time periods. How much has the Spanish language changed over time? In other words, if I handed you something would you be able to say, "Well, that might be 18th century" or "That's early colonial" or "That might have been last week." Has it changed that noticeably?

LEE: Yes. Absolutely. I just taught 19th Century Literature last semester and my students were like, "I don't understand half of what's being said." And I said it's probably much more straightforward. If it were written in 21st century language you would probably understand it. It's quite different. It is as different as Shakespeare to modern-day literature in English, as Quixote is to Modern-day Spanish Literature.

WOOLLEY: So you are talking mostly about Literature then.

LEE: Yes. Chris can talk about the historical documents.

WOOLLEY: Well, so I can tell you that I spent a lot of time looking at documents from the 1530s through the 1820s and certainly there are differences, but in terms of what I read are mostly court records, letters, and those kinds of things. What has always struck me is how similar the language is. I'm not talking about reading literature, but I would think anyone who speaks Spanish today would be will be able to make sense out of something from the 16th century. What is different are things like, for one, they didn't have much in the way of punctuation in the 16th century. So there are just these endless sentences and they are really frustrating, especially trying to get your indirect and direct objects and things squared away and it's not always clear. In terms of understanding it, it's not that difficult. What gets really hard with the documents is learning the paleography, and learning how to actually read the handwriting. There are certain schools of writing in the 16th century and many of them look like you wouldn't be able to read them at first, but when you have studied them there are certain patterns. Abbreviations are really common, especially in the 16th century. There are a lot of idiomatic things that you have to learn over time, but when you've see it once or twice and over time they come up again and again. Some of them are funny. You read documents written to a particular official and they'll say things like 'I kiss your Majesty's Royal feet' at the bottom of the document, a lot of supplicating and those kinds of things.

FREDERICK: So suck-ups have existed in every language for all of time.

WOOLLEY: Oh, yeah, but particularly in the Spanish world it is a way of talking.

FREDERICK: Richard, what about you? When you look at text, do you see word choice and word usage change over time?

VELA: Well, the Latino literature that I teach is all pretty much 20th century and really pretty much like from World War II to now for the most part and all that, so I see a regional differences. There's a movie called Zoot Suit and there's a play and a number of things connected with it, for example, where they're looking at World War II and that particular time period and the slang that was common then. The Zoot Suit outfit, the language, and Pachuco characters and all that. So that's very noticeable certainly, and all that, but I don't go further back in history. I run into it a lot when I teach English. A lot of people think that Shakespeare is old English. I'm going, no, you know, but that's a different issue.

FREDERICK: I think anybody who ever grades essays written in English today from current students would say that social media has changed the way in which people structure sentences and write and think and produce language with pen and ink. Is that true of Spanish as well? Has social media changed in some of the ways, and how so?

LÓPEZ-FRED: I teach the beginning course for writing composition in Spanish and you know, there's a so many things that we have to include, you know, when we write. Like, for example, in English you say people but in Spanish you have to say las personas or la gente, and so they tend not to write the definite articles because they think it's not needed, but then they try to write like they send their texts and so that is a problem. And we have to train and explain the student, you know, you're not writing to your friend. This is something that you going to write to somebody that you do not know and you need to be professional. So I start by taking them to the computer

lab, giving them the basic how to write and, you know, getting them to improve their writing. Okay, as we move along, I see the progress. But yes, everything is short sentences and they omit verbs, okay, like they do in English and so that's something that we have to work especially in the writing courses.

FREDERICK: You guys all have horror stories?

LEE: Uh, yeah, certainly. Then I think at least the students at UNCP, we have a diversity of students who study Spanish that can write at that level. And so, you have students who are really well trained in writing in English, and the students who aren't and so there's just there's a lot... Differentiated learning takes on new meaning when you're working with students who know how to write generally in a formal format, and then you put an extra language barrier there. And you're just sitting there for hours looking at it trying to make sense of it. Not all of our students, obviously, but it takes an extra amount of work, I think, to grade an essay in Spanish, and in particular like Milagros said, because students are not accustomed to the formal style of writing that you might have.

VELA: It's the distinctions lots of times, you know. As you're suggesting, the formal, the informal, tú y usted and all kinds of things like that they miss it seems to me. Although I don't have the experience that you're talking about because all my, everything they write for me is in English.

LEE: And related to that, I am teaching Medical Spanish this semester and it does not matter how much I tell them, you really need to be formal with each other in these situations. If you are a nurse or a doctor in a hospital you have to be using the formal. So they do these situations where they act the situations out. It does not matter how many times I tell them that, they will only use the informal tú. They just can't make themselves use the formal situation there. And so it's something that I have to kind of nail into their heads. And then they tell me, "but Professor Lee, nobody's using that at the hospitals. Everyone's using tú." And I don't know if that's true. I think people who really have conquered Spanish and are professional in those settings are using usted in hospital situations.

FREDERICK: Chris talked about looking at like some 16th century documents earlier, and at the risk of generalizing, one might gather that someone writing at that point in time, you know, was either elite or somehow connected to elites in one way or another. Is there a language of commoners that's strikingly different from the language of elites? And I know we see that in some of the penny press and some of the publications that came out, particularly in Mexico and other places, but couldn't we see how people communicate in the Spanish language differently based on class dimensions?

VELA: Very much, I think. And there are a couple of different ways. One is the suggestion of the Zoot Suit and the Pachuco and the whole idea there is a particular social class and orientation and it's less affluent certainly and all that. But there's also, and I saw a lot of this growing up and this is the kind of thing my grandmother would warn us about all that, if you mispronounce certain words or drop certain words or use informal when you're supposed to use formal, a lot of the slang comes out that way pretty much. We're essentially saying things where, for example, if

you say ama and apa rather than mamá and papá it suggests that you're sort of lower level, for example, and there are lots and lots of examples like that.

If you combine English with Spanish in certain ways, for example, *watchele*, you know, meaning watch out, that sort of thing. And there are lots of combinations like that, that also work, but it again suggests a lack of training in Spanish and lack of a sort of a deeper background in Spanish. It's the kind of thing where from Mexico they would say that you're *borcho* or *chollo* or something like that. That you're not, you know, authentic in effect.

LEE: Yeah, and one of the things that I find interesting, and I don't know if our students realize it, but a lot of them are from the US and grew up speaking Spanish, so they're totally fluent and then they bring this English-Spanish mix. And I think my Spanish is the Spanish of the person who intellectually at the University is teaching and so I'm trying to get them to move away from some of those, and they're very resistant because they'll tell me, "well people don't talk like that where I'm from, or my parents wouldn't understand" or like, "if I go to the hospital, they might not understand." Or they would understand if I said, "You need to be *chequiar*." And I'm like *chequiar* is just from English, you know. If you go to Argentina, they're not going to understand *chequiar*. I'm sorry. And everyone speaks like that here and so the English-Spanish in the US actually has its own linguistic characteristics that has evolved from the generations of people living here and speaking it.

FREDERICK: Would you say it's a gendered language, too? Are there ways in which women speak or write the language that seem to be somewhat different than the ways in which men do?

VELA: I think there is a movement, *Latinx* to try to think more in terms of, not so much, you know, male-female because the language is set up that way pretty much and the idea is to move away from that to some extent. I don't know for sure if you can say that women speak a particular way or men speak a particular way in this time and day. Certainly I think, you know, way back, probably so.

LÓPEZ-FRED: Not these things. I don't think there's a different. Like you said, they're trying to get to the *Latinx* and all that but right now those are words in Spanish have gender sure and you know. And some students are already asking about it. Are we, do we have anything in common, you know, in between, that is not gender-wise. Today we don't, but you know, with the evolution of everything of the languages, I don't know what we be going right later on in that.

FREDERICK: For many of our listeners who only speak one language, and it's not Spanish, what would you tell them about Spanish? What would you like them to walk away feeling about the language that you work in every day?

WOOLLEY: I would say that you can learn it and you should. You live in a Spanish-speaking country you know. I think the United States is the third largest Spanish speaking country?

VELA: Yeah.

WOOLLEY: I think there are more Spanish speakers here than in Spain. And just learning a few words here and going onto the Babble, or what is the other one that people are using?

LEE: Rosette Stone? Duolingo?

WOOLLEY: Yeah, these kinds of things. The more you learn about something it is easier to break in. There's a whole world there and it takes work, like anything, but it's a really rewarding tool to learn and get into that world.

LÓPEZ-FRED: I think it is possible and people should know to learn another language and why not Spanish? Expand your area that you can discover more about other countries and not the one where you live at, so that's a must I think, you know.

FREDERICK: What a great way to expand to your horizons and enter through the gateway of a new culture, right? And so many unique and interesting elements of it.

VELA: Well, and there a number of jobs that are available for bilingual people, and that's important. My sister works for a health corporation in Dallas, Texas, and she does what she does because she can handle both languages and that makes a big difference. But I mean, as he was saying a minute ago, there's a tremendous number of people in this country who speak Spanish. You can't walk through Walmart at some hours of the day without hearing someone speaking Spanish, for example. And sometimes you'll see the kids, for example, translating for the parents or things like that. It's a usual sort of situation, but it's pervasive. When I grew up on the border there were many cases where if you didn't know Spanish you could get left out in some very obvious sorts of ways. You know, how much is that going to cost? Dile esto and somebody would charge a price that was above because they knew you didn't know. It's like going to a car dealer and not knowing how to speak car dealerese, as it were.

FREDERICK: Right.

Lee: And I just have to say if I had a dollar for every time a friend of mine said, if only I had studied Spanish harder in college, I'd be a rich woman. So long-term thinking for our college students in particular. When you look back like 10 or 20 years, this is actually the time you can really focus and learn these kinds of things. It gets harder as you get older but it's super useful for our students. Super.

FREDERICK: Well, I might ask you to end with a favorite word in Spanish, but at the risk of tempting fate on a Friday afternoon, in grace and civility, we won't go there today. This has been great. You guys have taken us inside a language that many of us know a little bit about but not nearly what you guys do. So thanks very much for a really interesting discussion. And for those of you listening, wherever you're listening and whatever language you're listening to, hope you'll tune in next time for 30 Brave Minutes.

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