Answers to “WHY” [did/do I ...] questions

WHY SPANISH? Part 1

I had picked up some Spanish in high school; actually our teacher Mrs. Shirley Flanner had managed to teach me more than I thought, considering how unruly and undisciplined I was in high school. Arriving at Rice University in 1968 with the intention of studying electrical engineering, I encountered a language requirement. Just before my sophomore year (in the meantime trying out my Spanish with the buildings and grounds staff) I spoke with the then chair of the department of Classics, Russian, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese (the “Rice C.R.I.S.P.-y” department), Dr. James Castañeda, who after a brief conversation in Spanish, told me I could sign up for a 3rd-year Spanish course. I chose a sort of advanced language course, taught by Prof. Héctor Urrutibehéity, an Argentine of French Basque extraction. In Texas terms, this course “liketa killed me”; Dr. U. was highly organized and unrelenting, and I spent at least half the semester gasping for air, but by the end of the term I came to appreciate his systematic approach to the study of language, and even though I had probably already satisfied the language requirement, I knew that I wanted to take another course from this amazing professor.

WHY LINGUISTICS?

Linguists are born, not made, but most don’t know that until some happy event reveals the inner linguist. For me, the game changer was Rice University’s Spanish 349, History of the Spanish language, taught by Dr. Urrutibehéity. We used Spaulding’s *How Spanish grew* plus Dr. U’s extensive notes, and this is when the wannabe engineer veneer fell away to expose my true vocation: linguistics. After this apocryphal course I took a graduate course on Romance linguistics from Dr. U. and some independent studies from him, an undergrad course in Spanish phonetics (using the book by my future emeritus colleague John Dalbor), and another grad course by Dr. Humbero López-Morales, during his brief stay at Rice before heading to the University of Puerto RIco, but my real mentor throughout was Dr. U. I knew I wanted to study historical linguistics, with emphasis on phonetics/phonology, and inspired by Dr. U’s own background, my goal was Romance linguistics, in preparation for which I took basic courses in Italian and Portuguese.

Not knowing that Romance linguistics was never a viable academic displine in the United States, I started looking for appropriate graduate programs. I had my heart set on the University of Washington, but they wisely rejected my naive and fumbling application. The U of Arizona accepted me to their Spanish graduate program, but upon reading the fine print, I saw that I would have to pay all tuition and fees from the meagre assistantship stipend (less than $2000 as I recall), and since I had no money, this was not possible. Penn State also accepted me to the program that many decades later I would lead, and even offered me a Sparks fellowship, but the most attractive alternative was the University of Alberta, which had a bona fide Romance Linguistics track in the Romance Languages department (decades later I was offered the

position of department chair in the same department, which had long since dropped Romance Linguistics). They accepted me despite my minimal training in linguistics (but I did have a second major in mathematics), and during a summer 1971 civil service job at Ellington Air Force Base in Texas, I taught myself French in my spare time. I began my graduate studies at the University of Alberta in the fall of 1971.

In Alberta I threw myself into all aspects of Romance and general linguistics and bombarded my teachers with unsolicited writings above and beyond course assignments. I was required to write a Masters' thesis, so I did a phonological analysis of Brazilian Portuguese, engaging in the then topical issue of ordered vs. unordered phonological rules. By the second year I was getting my first articles published, on Portuguese, Galician, and Spanish, but also writing about Italian and French. My doctoral dissertation (1974), which emerged after several false starts and conflicts with committee members (due almost entirely to my own impulsive frenzy) was a study in the historical phonology of Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian, combining my love of historical linguistics with my fascination with phonology.

WHY SPANISH? Part 2

By our second year in Alberta, my wife and I had obtained the status of landed immigrants (permanent residents), enabling us to remain in the country indefinitely and eventually apply for Canadian citizenship. This was during one of the most politically and socially divisive periods in the United States, with the Viet Nam war raging and Richard Nixon persecuting protesters even more vigorously than Lyndon Johnson had done. I was not in Canada to avoid the draft (I had drawn the very lucky number 341 in Nixon's first draft lottery), but given the ugly "Love it or Leave it" environment in the U. S., the thought of becoming Canadians was quite attractive. Unfortunately, the Canadian job market in linguistics was terrible (and naturally, any "Romance" jobs were looking for French specialists), and moreover, the prevaiing "Canada for Canadians" policy excluded permanent residents as candidates for academic positions. The prospect was waiting at least 5 more years with an aging Ph D and few chances for any meaningful employment in the interim, only to apply for a vanishingly small number of jobs at Canadian universities. Reluctantly, at the end of my second year in graduate school, I began to look for jobs in the United States, where the job market was not appreciably better than in Canada (more openings, but many more applicants). In practical terms I had no truly marketable skills, but I applied for jobs in Spanish, all unsuccessful except for the offer of a campus visit for a non-tenure-track lecturership at Newark State College (in Union, New Jersey). I would have to pay y own travel expenses (airfare from Alberta to Newark was a formidable challenge for a penniless graduate student) with the magnificent offer of getting half of the airfare eventually reimmbursed if and only if I were offered the job and accepted. This was a critical point in my life. I was fed up with graduate studies and grim job prospects on either side of the U. S.-Canadian border, and as a Plan B I had been accepted into a speech pathology program at the University of British Colombia (inspired by a fascinating course in neurolinguistics I had taken). Job opporunities were very good for clinicians, even in Canada, and who wouldn't want to spend time in Vancouver? I was one signature away from ditching linguistics and the academic life, but having come that far, I decided to splurge on a plane ticket to New Jersey and see what

might happen. The department chair generously lodged me in his home and picked up incidental ground expenses, and despite a very clumsy interview, I was offered the position. We moved in the summer of 1973. Truck rentals were not possible across the international border, so we placed our few belongings at the mercy of a moving company. Our goods were lost en route for almost two months, but fortunately we were house-sitting for the department chair so we didn't have to sleep on the floor. We eventually found an apartment in Elizabeth, NJ, within walking distance of the campus of Newark State College, a small urban former normal school that shortly thereafter changed its name to Kean College of New Jersey after a generous donation from the Kean NJ political dynasty (today Kean University, apparently a much more serious institution than the one I worked for). During the student orientation days, a local band that had just cut its first record gave a free concert in the parking lot: Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band.

In the languages department, I got off to a rough start with my Spanish colleagues (all former Cuban lawyers and judges), who voted to fire me after just a few months on the job (a sloppily engineered process later overturned by the administration), and I went to the MLA in Chicago in December 1973 (also at my own expense) completely dejected. I did have one promising interview when I walked from the Conrad Hilton Hotel to the recently opened University of Illinois at Chicago Circle (at the time the only university in the world named after a traffic intersection), today the splendid University of Illinois-Chicago. Things looked quite good until I later got a call from the dept. chair that the position had been cancelled. With no apparent future in academia, at NSC/Kean or elsewhere, I even looked into the possibility of teaching English to helicopter pilots for the Shah of Iran, among other stop-gap measures.

I had no intention of appealing the decision at Newark State, but unbeknownst to me, a senior colleague in French sent a scathing minority report to the university administration, which overturned the decision and reprimanded the department. I received another one-year contract, and suddenly, my Cuban colleagues assured me that there was "nothing personal" in their previous action. As we got to know one another better, I became more aware of my own shortcomings, and they came to see me as a member of their team, and were helpful rather than disparaging. My on-the-ground knowledge of the *Cubaneo* ethos has served me well in the remainder of my career, and ultimately my 2-year gig in New Jersey, where I taught an immense number of courses of all sorts gave me the experience needed for a tenure-track position. Between the intensely colloquial speech of my Cuban colleagues and the vernacular of my "NuyoRican" students, I got a lot of exposure to varieties of Spanish not found in textbooks, and the nascent variationist in me began to awaken.

WHY SPANISH? Part 3

My life-changing break began in 1974, when the U. S. Supreme Court handed down the Lau vs. Nichols decision which essentially mandated bilingual education. School systems were caught off guard, as were colleges and universities, so the rush was on to develop programs and train experts. In the summer of 1974 I defended my doctoral dissertation, and during my stint at NSC/Kean I published many articles, including linguistic aspects of French literature (Jarry's *Ubu*

roi and Rimbaud's "Les voyelles"), formal models of text analysis, and my first output on the fascinating Latin American "Boom" novels. At the same time I was now deeply interested in Spanish language variation and publiahed the first of my *Hispania* articles in the "Notes on usage" section. In December, 1974 the MLA meeting was in nearby New York, and my most promising interview was with Michigan State, which was looking for a linguist to help develop a bilingual program and also to coordinate elementary and intermediate Spanish classes. I honestly had no real experience with either of the requirements, but apparently my eclectic and prolific output was intriguing enough to land me a campus interview in early 1975. The Romance and Classical Languages department was heavily literature-based, and with the exception of one colleague in French, had no experience with linguistics or linguists. My job talk, an early attept to refute claims that Puerto RIcans spoke degenerate Spanish, produced an amazingly positive response: a senior colleague in French, known for her outspoken East Coast style, jumped up and loudly proclaimed "John Lipski, you turn me on!"

A formal version of the talk was later published as: "The language battle in Puerto Rico", *Revista Interamericana,* 5 (1975), 346-54.

The fact that I could engage in discussions about French and Latin American literature won me points from the majority literature camp, and my linguistic studies on Italian brought me closer to the small Italian contingent. My stay was extended by a day due to a snowstorm (in the Great Lake State, no matter which direction the wind comes from, it crosses a lake and brings snow), leading to more informal and friendly encounters. It all came together when Michigan State offered me the position, for which I will be forever grateful. After three years my colleagues put me up for early tenure (I only found out when the process had started, which terrified me), probably convincing the dean to also take into consideration my 2 non tenure-track years in New Jersey.

In my first year I was coordinator of the first-year Spanish program, and by the second year I was coordinating elementary and intermediate Spanish, 6 quarters, and teaching a 3-3-2 load. I had no assistant or other support (I did get a very old electric typewriter), so the teaching assistants and I did everything ourselves, including typing mimeograph stencils. This sounds like exploitation, but everyone had heavy loads in those days, and despite my being the new guy, my colleagues treated me splendidly. Most of the teaching assistants were as old or older than I was, and I learned leadership by example on the fly. The multi-tasking and organizational demands have served me well from that point on.

A colleague in Spanish literature and I developed and implemented a proficiency exam for wannabe Spanish bilingual teachers in the state of Michigan, I gave summer workshops for Michigan school teachers and did some consultation for the Detroit school system, and I became acquainted with even more varieties of Spanish. I developed and taught probably one of the first courses anywhere on Spanish in the United States, scrambling to find bibliography, and relying mostly on the old anthology *El lenguaje de los chicanos* edited by Eduardo Hernández-Chávez (many years later to become my colleague at the University of New Mexico), and *Bilingualism in the barrio* by Joshua Fishman and colleagues. An up-and-coming writer from

the new Chicano Studies program at the University of Minnesota visited my class one day; Rolando Hinojosa-Smith would soon become one of the world's foremost Mexican-American authors, winning prizes both in the United States and abroad. I also taught several courses in the then popular "contrastive structures" approach, which compelled me to systematically study the detailed linguistic structures of both Spanish and English.

During my MSU years I also wrote a number of articles that analyzed more Latin American "boom" novels, and I even tried to get a monograph published (it never was), but I finally acknowledged that I wasn't trained for literary analysis, even with a linguistic/semiotic orientation, and from that point on it was just linguistics, *pura y dura*.

As Spanish language coordinator, I was frequently visited by publishers' representatives promoting their wares, and although we did change books once, I generally resisted the gambits, with explanations of what I felt were shortcomings. I was visited by one woman from Holt, Rinehart and Winston, who turned out to not a salesperson but an incognito acquisitions editor, who called my bluff and challenged me to write my own book. She paired me up with the late Eduardo Neale-Silva, an emeritus Chilean professor at the University of Wisconsin who had written several high school and college Spanish textbooks. I visited him once at the beginning, and everything else was done by mail (this was pre email, pre-computers, we sent typescripts to each other). Our styles and approaches were very different, and I'm sure that Neale was exasperated by my undisciplined youthful enthusiasm, but we did manage to pull off a book that was quite successful for a while, *El español en Síntesis*. My own idea was to not introduce the subjunctive as a Pandora's box of awful things to be learned (students knew that the subjunctive was always presented in the final chapters, which meant that it must be bad). My idea was to slip it in piecemeal across several chapters during discussions of speech acts: negating, questioning, wishing, etc. Although designed as a possible 3rd-year book for L2 students, it was frequently adopted for the first generation of heritage Spanish classes at various universities.

In the summer of 1978 I directed MSU's summer abroad program in Valencia, Spain, and in the winter quarter of 1981 I directed the program in Mérida, Yucatan (Mexico), all of which whetted my appetite even more for Spanish dialect variation. That same year I accepted a position at the University of Houston, reluctantly leaving my colleagues at MSU, but hoping for more possibilities in linguistics.

My research career truly took off while I was at the U of H, despite being betrayed and marginalized by a deeply flawed departmental environment (a story too painful to dwell on further): two Fulbright research fellowships, my first books, and dozens of articles. Even so, it took me seven years to advance my career to the next level (at the University of Florida); had I remained at the U of H, I would still be held back to this day as an associate professor.

There were also high points in my UH years. My colleague Nick Kanellos, founder of the *Revisra Chicano-Riqueña* and Arte Público Press, brought many prominent Latino writers to our university, and I got the chance to meet Tato Laviera, Sandra Cisneros, Miguel Algarín, Rolando Hinojosa (again), among others.

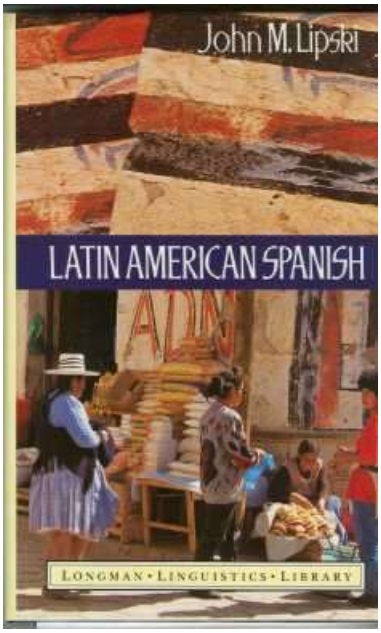
In the summer of 1982 I co-directed our summer program in Costa Rica. During the 1982 winter break, I organized and led a group of students and community members to Sandinista NIcaragua, the first U. S. university group to visit the relatively new political environment. A year later I organized a similar trip to Honduras, where we visited the Mayan ruins of Copán, a United Fruit banana plantation, and many other cultural spots. In the 1984 winter interlude I took a group to Panama, where we visited the Panama Canal, the Colón Free Zone, Taboga Island, the Congos of Portobelo, the San Blas Kuna islands, and a visit to the U. S. embassy for a briefing on the recently-signed Torrijos-Carter treaty that would return sovereignty of the Canal Zone to Panama as well as administration of the canal. I later organized and co-directed a summer program in Quito, Ecuador, during which I became aware of the Afro-descendent communities of the Chota Valley (see corresponding section). At the end, we took an optional trip to Peru, visiting Lima (under seige by the Sendero Luminoso rebels), Cuzco, Ollantaytambo, and Machu Picchu.

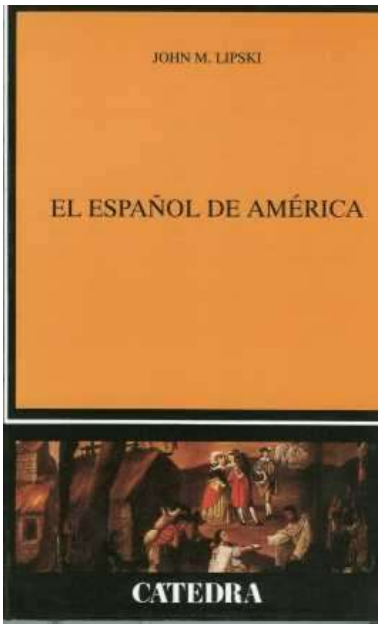
Taking advantage of many low-cost flights to Central America, I conducted extensive fieldwork in Honduras, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua (see section on Honduras). After obtaining some pilot data in Equatorial Guinea during my 1983 Fulbright fellowship to Spain (see corresponding section), I received an internal UH grant to return in 1984 for a systematic research study.

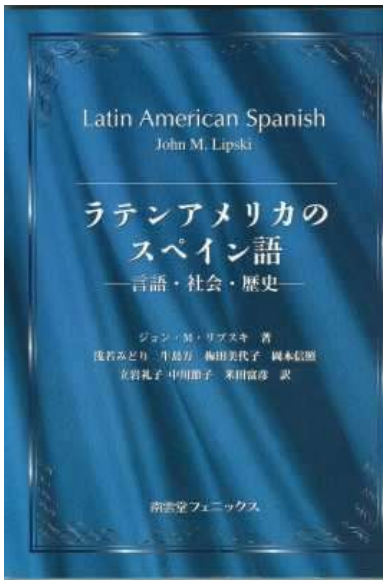
My days at the University of Florida were quite memorable; I taught both Spanish linguistics and general linguistics in what was then a program (now its own department). I directed several interesting dissertations and worked with a variety of international students. I left after only 4 years because the regents reneged on all faculty contracts, and I felt that if they could get away with that, academic freedom and tenure would be next.

While at UF, I was approached by the book review editor of *Hispanic Linguistics* to review a book on Latin American Spanish. I looked the book over and found it to be full of problems, despite

being published by a major press, and since I was raised with the old-fashioned notion that if I didn't have anything good to say, it was better to say nothing at all, I declined the request. But the editors insisted that I was their guy, so as a compromise gambit I suggested the idea of doing a review article on several works on Latin American Spanish that had appeared at roughly the same time, commenting on the useful portions of each (even "that" book did have some strong points). They agreed and the review article was published in *Hispanic Linguistics*. I was then contacted by the publisher of "that" book, who could read between the lines and wished that they had asked me to review the book before it was published. Shortly thereafter it came to the attention of a British scholar who was also an acquisitions editor for Longmans. He suggested that I write my own book on Latin American Spanish, while he did the same for varieties in Spain. I don't believe that the latter book was ever written, but my *Latin American Spanish* became my "best seller." It was translated into Spanish by Cátedra without my knowledge; I found out after a couple of bound volumes arrived in the mail! Only a few yearws ago, at a conference in Peru, I met the woman who had translated the book, and I got the chance to compliment her on her excellent work. The book was also translated into Japanese (this time consulting with me), by six Japanese scholars and a Costa Rican who lived in Japan; they called themselves the "7 Samurai." I was invited to Kyoto for the presentation of the book, where my name was adapted to Japanese phonotactics as "Li-pu-si-ki".







I left UF for the University of New Mexico, where after a year I ended up as graduate advisor for 3 years and then department chair for 4 more years. I had the opportunity to witness the data collection for the magnificent linguistic atlas of NM and southern Colorado, an exhaustive documentation of the oldest surviving variety of Spanish in the Americas. Many of my students were Nuevomexicanos, and I developed a course on Spanish as a world language that began with 1492 (including Sephardic Spanish), the first year that the language left Spain and became part of the rest of the world. The course was wildly successful, and the NM students could

identify with the many archaisms found in both traditional NM Spanish and the early documents we studied.

Our departmental constitution was similar to that of Mexico: universal sufferage and no re-election. At the end of my 4-year term my colleagues suggested amending our bylaws so that I could serve another term (mostly because nobody else wanted to do it). I declined because I didn't want to become one of those "presidentes constitucionales" who legitimize a de facto coup by writing a new constitution. After eight years at UNM, having served in two administrative capacities and having published more than any other colleague (not boasting, just factual), I was actually earning less in real dollars than when I had arrived, due to departmental criteria that were strongly at odds with university policies. When Penn State offered me a headship to rebuild a department that had some internal issues, I accepted (I've never played the counter-offer game, and no one in the UNM administration gave a damn anyway). I miss my UNM students and the many cultures and life histories they represented. Had the economic situation been different, I'd probably still be there.

WHY AFRO-HISPANIC?

While still at Michigan State, an older graduate student from Guyana approached me about the possibility of doing an independent study on the African contribution to Spanish. At the time I had no inkling of the significance of the question, but she showed me two books she had checked out of the MSU library, and which were to launch me on a research track that continued for the rest of my career: Germán de Granda's anthology *Estudios lingüísticos hispánicos, afrohispánicos y criollos* and Manuel Álvarez Nazario's *El elemento afronegroide en el español de Puerto Rico* (I later became good friends with Granda and engaged in correspondence and exchange of publications with Álvarez Nazario, finally meeting him at his home in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico). Granda's collection of articles provided my first knowledge of Palenquero and other creole languages, and eventually inspired my work with the *Congos* of Panama (see that section), but it was Álvarez Nazario's amazing book that opened my eyes to the treasure trove of literary imitations of Afro-Hispanic speech from the 16th century onward, as well as more credible data from the Caribbean dialect zone. I realized that the upwards of eight million enslaved Africans taken to Spanish America had left a much greater imprint on the Spanish language than was ever acknowledged, and I set out to start filling in the gigantic lacuna in the history of the Spanish language. It was with the greatest admiration that I dedicated my book on the history of Afro-Hispanic language to the memory of Don Manuel, an extraordinary scholar whose prolific publications cover virtually every aspect of Puerto Rican Spanish.

Starting with my years at the University of Houston and continuing through the end of my career at Penn State, I was able to visit numerous Afro-Hispanic speech communities and obtain useful inguistic data, in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Panama, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Uruguay, and Paraguay. This work got me internal grants from Penn State's African Research Center, an internal fellowship from Penn State's Institute for Arts and Humanities, and a Guggenheim fellowship. I had a third Fulbright research fellowship essentially approved to work with Afro-Bolivians, but it was cancelled by State Dept.

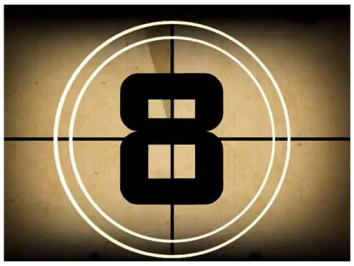
intervention (I learned through back channels). Working with Black people who grow coca probably didn't sit well with the George W. Bush administration, which was already in a standoff with Bolivian president Evo Morales. I then started to apply for another Fulbright, for Uruguay, when the rules changed: two Fulbrights per lifetime (previously only after waiting a few years). I had one in 1983 (Andalusia and Canary Islands in Spain) and another in 1985 (Philippines, to study Chabacano). Sigh. But some years later I did get some of my tax money back in the form of an NSF grant to work with the Afro-Colombian community of San Basilio de Palenque. And then another NSF grant to study Media Lengua-Kichwa bilinguals in Ecuador.

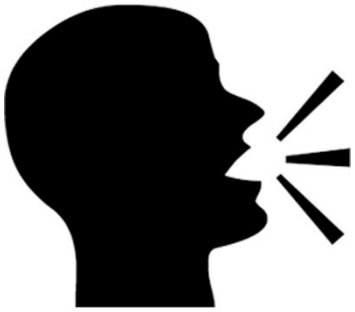
WHY EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLINGUISTIC FIELDWORK?

Up until the first decade of the 21st century, my field data collection was based on ethnographic and sociolinguistic methodolgy: interviews and directed questions, as well as observation of spontaneous speech. Not long after my arrival at Penn State in 2000, the spontaneous weekly colloquia that would eventually coalesce into the Center for Language Science were held under the auspices of the Psychology department. Some of the early talks were about non-human primates and other non-language-related topics, but as more linguists entered the mix, language-centered discussions became more frequent. What my colleagues in psychology called psycholinguistics at first seemed to me a misnomer, since there were no obvious theories of language and many of the "languages" used in experiments were just tiny lists of words that bore little resemblance to natural languages. My dismissive stance faded away as I realized what psychologists brought to the table that linguists lacked: workable and empirically testable theories of mind, and an amazing array of tried and true experimental techniques. Since I already had a major research paradigm up and running in San Basilio de Palenque, Colombia and some other developing projects, I decided to introduce some interactive elements. My first foray took place in Palenque, where I prepared a list of sentences extracted from previous interviews, and asked participants to classify each sentence as all-Spanish, all-Palenquero, or mixed. I quickly discovered that linguists' non-overlapping descriptions of Spanish and the Spanish-lexified creole language Palenqero were much to rigid and did not conform to Palenqueros' more permeable linguistic boundaries. This insight served me well in my subsequent research in Palenque, as well as with Kichwa-Media Lengua speakers in Ecuador and Portuguese-Spanish speakers in MIsiones, Argentina.

Encouraged by the willingness of my Palenquero participants to engage in activities other than the usual interviews and story-telling, I jumped head-first into psycholinguistic techniques with a series of memory-loaded repetition tasks, in which participants listened to a stimulus that was manipulated to exhibit certain grammatical configurations, then were distracted by another task, and finally asked to repeat the stimulus utterance. This often results in participants' "repeating" what they thought they heard/would have said instead of the actual stimulus, providing a useful measure of acceptability that avoids the pitfalls of explicit acceptability judgment tasks. My first experiments—in Palenque and in Ecuador—required participants to memorize and repeat random numbers before repeating the stimulus sentence, but I quickly gravitated the use of short video clipsm (typically action cartoons, but in Ecuador clips of cultural events), followed by a 10-second old-fashioned movie "countdown" during which the

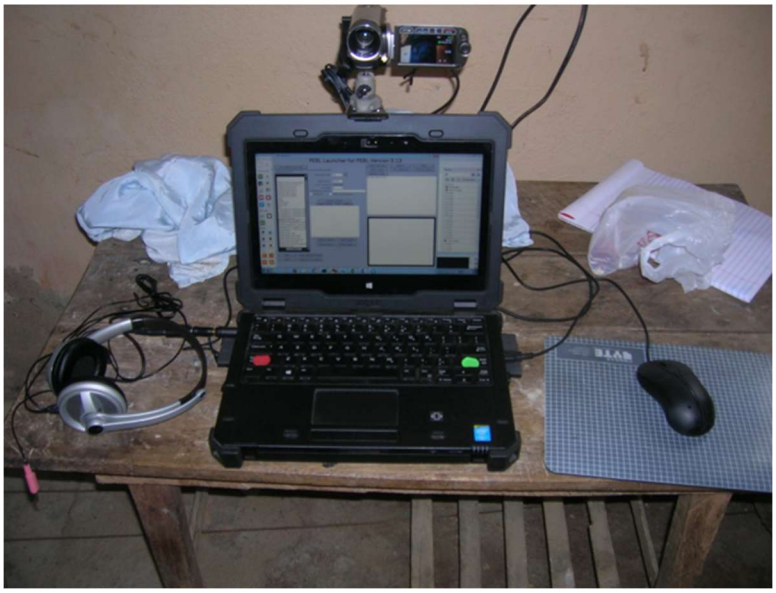
participants were to describe the video in the language of their choice (giving a spoken corpus as a dividend), then repeat the stimulus utterance.

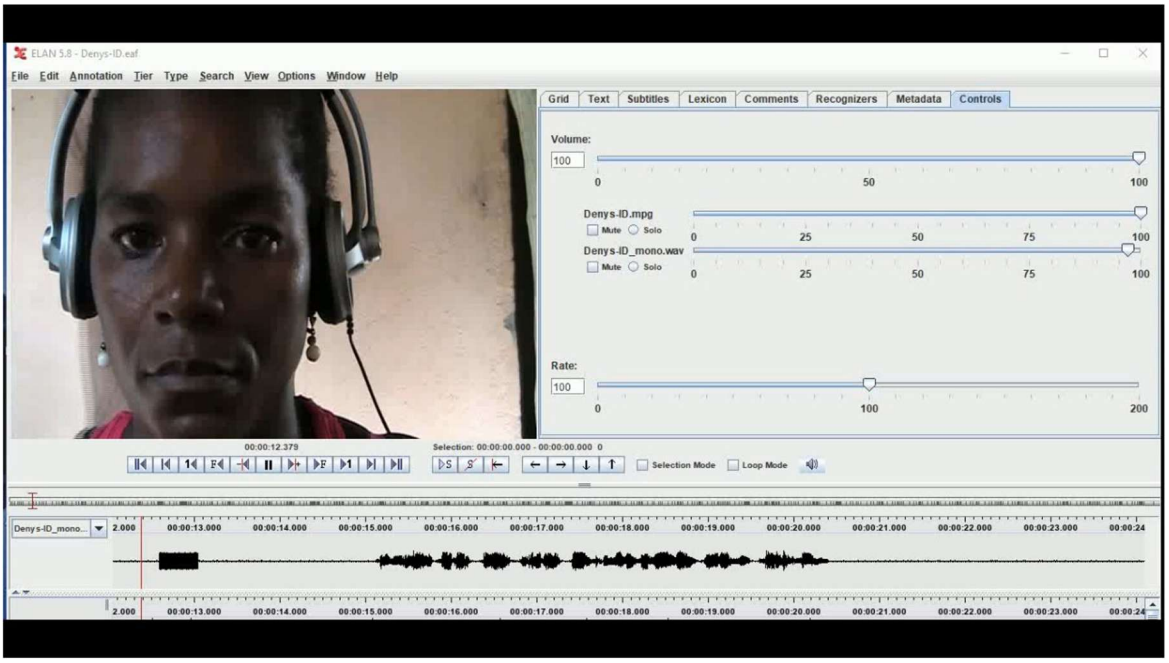




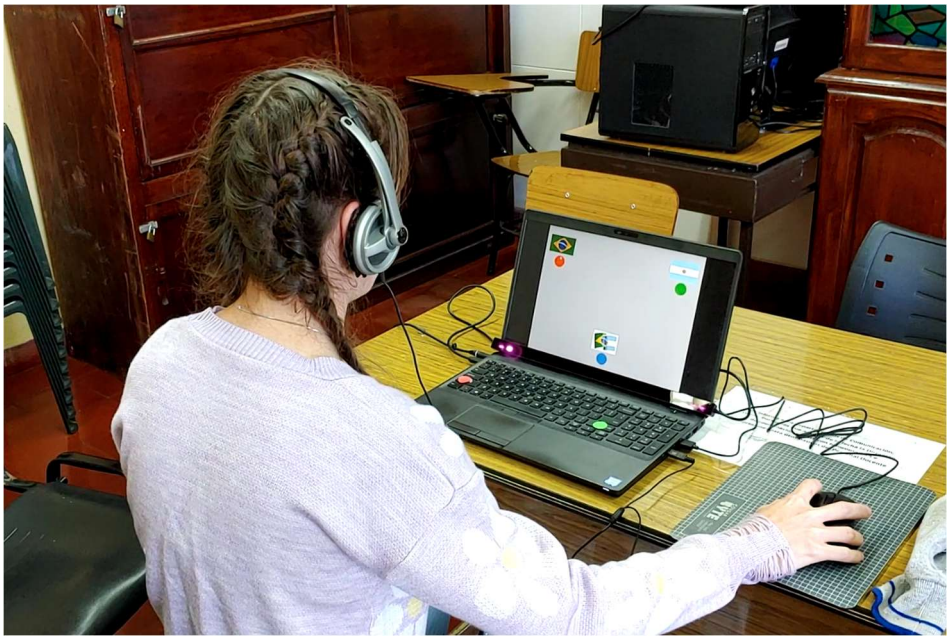
I continued to develop my own interactive computer-based experiments, always using free open-source software: PEBL, PsychoPy, OpenSesame, etc. The experimental results complemented my ethnographic/sociolinguistic data, and enabled me to secure two NSF grants (for Palenquero and for Kichwa-Media Lengua).

Working in Palenque, I even improvised some eye-tracking experiments, with a high-resolution camcorder and importing the videos into ELAN.





For my second NSF grant (Kichwa-Media Lengua in Ecuador), I was able to acquiree a Tobii portable eyetracker (120 Hz sampling), and later a new upgraded Tobii eyetracker (250 Hz sampling), which took my research to a whole new level, including pupilometry as well as fine-grained eyetracking experiments (in Ecuador, Palenque, and Misiones, Argentina).



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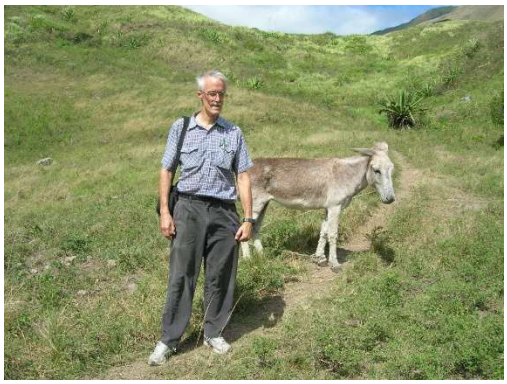
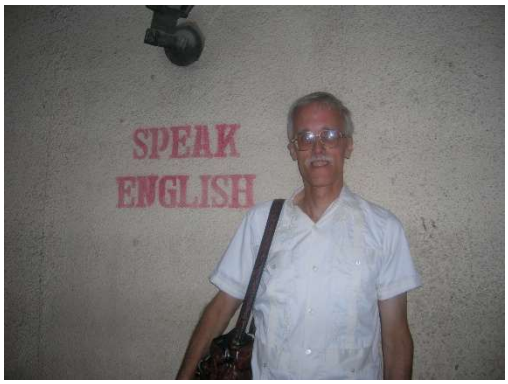
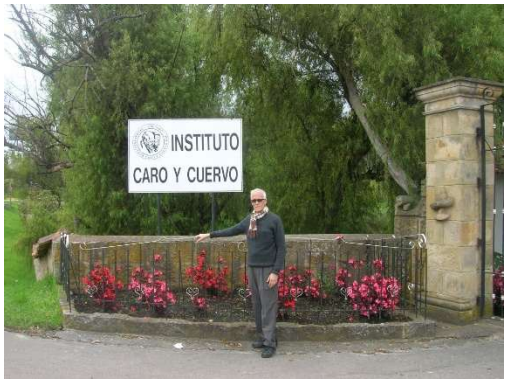



SPEAK
ENGLISH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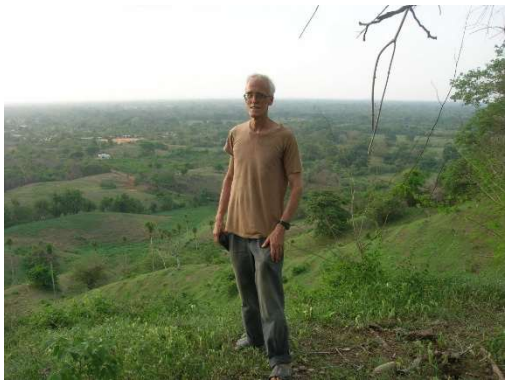
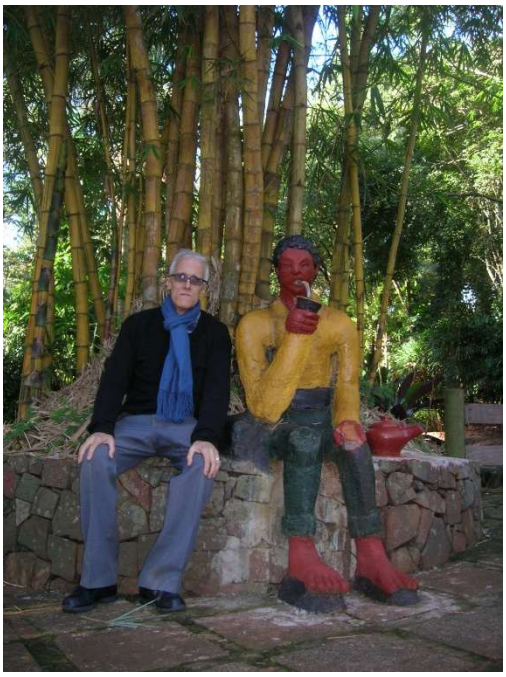
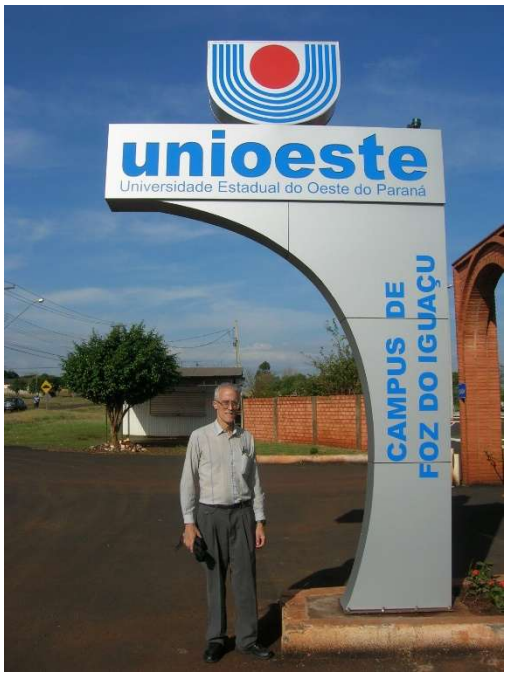



YO COMO
BASURA


SOY CHIQUITO PERO
CORAZON GRANDE


PROHIBIDO INGRESAR EN:
ESTADO ETÍLICO o CON BEBIDAS ALCÓHOLICAS

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