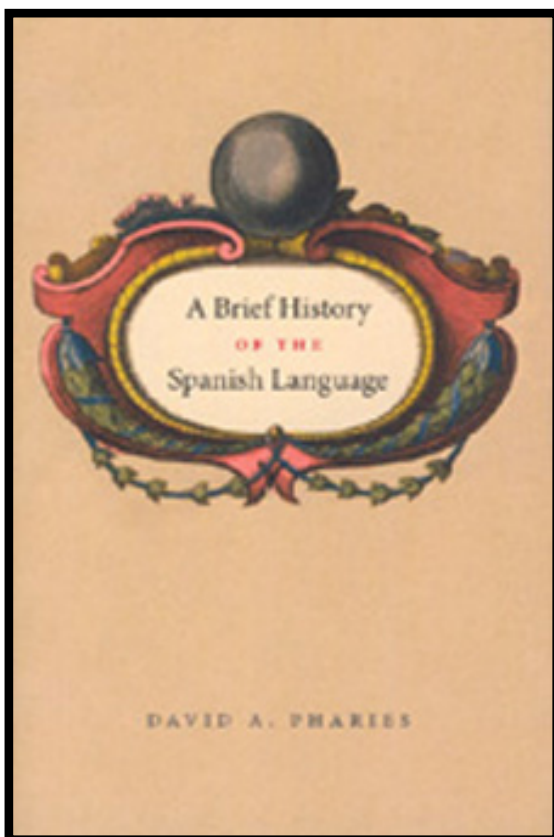


David A. Pharies. *A Brief History of the Spanish Language*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007. pp. 298 ISBN 9780226666822

Reviewed by Viola Miglio  
University of California, Santa Barbara



## 1. Introduction

*Brief History* is an introductory textbook to the history and evolution of Spanish. Structurally it is made up of 9 chapters and an Introduction: I will address the different chapters in turn. Considering that the book is an introductory textbook on the history of the Spanish language, I will consider it mostly under a pedagogical light. As Pharies himself points out in his Introduction (xiii), the fact that *Brief History* is mostly a textbook does not detract academic rigour from the treatment of the material, which can be easily analysed in depth following up on his many citations of specialised bibliography. One particularly valuable feature of the book are the question sections at the end of each chapter: they are a good revision tool for the material explained in the body of the chapter and

often turn into ‘hands-on’ practical exercises that allow the students to apply what they have learnt to specific problems.

## 2. Structure of *Brief History*

The Introduction is concerned with explaining two main questions as concisely as possible: what is language history and why is it worth studying, both convincingly explained by the author. His *Brief History* here clearly lays out its premises: a book on the history of the language has to comprise both internal and external history. In this sense it follows in the steps of illustrious predecessors such as Lapesa and has at least superficially an advantage over Penny, which focuses specifically on the internal history of Spanish. In actual fact, though, at least the first 1500 years of history from Roman occupation to the low Middle Ages are dealt with in one chapter, Chapter

Three 'External History of the Iberian Peninsula up to the Thirteenth Century'. Subsequent history is mentioned elsewhere (such as in Chapter 7, 'From Medieval Castilian to Modern Spanish'). *Brief History* still has an advantage over Penny, which devotes only the introductory chapter to a very schematic historical overview, mixed with linguistic topics. It should be mentioned that Pharies is one of only three recent works on the history of Spanish language in English, with Penny and Pountain, the latter taking a more radical, hands-on approach through textual analysis, and it is therefore not directly comparable to Penny and Pharies.

Even if Pharies claims in the preface that '...unusual is the balance that has been achieved between aspects of internal and external history...' (xiii), and the balance is indeed better, but in my experience using Pharies as a textbook in class, considerably more historical context is needed for students to grasp the background against which linguistic events occur.

Apart from the somewhat more extended historical information, Pharies adopts a more holistic approach to the topics he deals with, interspersing information in separate diagrams that break up the text. The diagrams offer myth-debunking information (cf. 'A linguistic Myth: the Cacophony of the Pronoun Combination \**le lo*' p. 113, 'The Lispering King' on p. 155, and 'The Phonemic Character of Spanish' p. 165), or in-depth information about a specific topic that otherwise could not be dealt with seamlessly within the text of the chapter (as the diagram on Sephardic on p. 144). They can also be on interesting and amusing subjects (such as 'The Reduplicative Playful Template' p. 176), and they definitely attract the attention of the students and offer a diversion from the main argument line, while still related to the basic topic of the chapter.

Stylistically there are some infelicitous comments (nothing compared to Lapesa's ideologically charged prose, however!) such as: '[s]ome of these changes [in human culture] are easily detectable, as when from year to year hemlines rise and fall or certain dietary fads come into vogue.' (1): at best the description seems quaintly old-fashioned, at worst sexist –why not 'as when from year to year belts loosen and drop-crotch jeans reveal more or less underwear'?

The first chapter deals with language change in general, its causes and the methodology to study it. Since it is the one chapter that I find problematic, it is dealt with separately, in the next section of this review.

The second chapter is called 'The Genealogy of Spanish' and explains the genetic relationship among Indo-European, and Romance languages, as well as mentioning non IE families and explaining concepts such as language family, cognates, bilingualism and diglossia –applied in this case to the Latin 'high language' and the *sermo rusticus* that gave rise to the Romance varieties.

The third chapter is a brief account of the external history of Spanish: it is very schematic, although understandably, one-semester courses, or even more so one-quarter courses do not allow for much time spent on external history. In my experience I have had to supplement this section with further readings and sometimes

documentaries (the TVE series *Memoria de España*, 2004 has been particularly useful for this purpose).

Chapter 4 is a detailed analysis of the structure of Latin: although this is useful for the student to know, I question the need to print all possible declensions of nouns, pronouns and adjectives. If more external history did not make it into the book for practical reasons concerning the time students can devote to each single chapter in a semester, certainly expecting them to learn Latin declensions and being able to translate from Latin into English/Spanish and vice versa, as required by questions 10, 11, 12 seems unreasonable and perhaps daunting, at least not extremely useful.

Chapter 5 is devoted to the phonological evolution from Latin to Medieval Spanish. It is concise and exhaustive, and compared to the more traditional textbook treatments (such as Lapesa, 1981), it has a limited, but sufficient number of examples that the students can easily grasp in a compact time frame. There are a couple of general points, which seem contradictory, considering what the author maintains in the first chapter of the book (see further discussion below): on page 75 Pharies lists 'the heterogeneity of the language' as one of the main factors for language change, something he had criticised in chapter one (14). In chapter one he had also defended the gradualness of language change, but on page 76 he urges readers to realise that an important characteristic of phonological change is 'the fact that changes of this type occupy a limited span of time.' A cause, which I thought was severely underestimated if not absent in chapter one, the reduction of articulatory effort, is here mentioned as 'the immediate cause of many of the changes on [this] list' (84).

Particularly useful and not always found in treatments of the evolution of Spanish, which typically privilege sound change over other parts of the grammar, is Chapter 6, devoted to morphological and syntactic changes from Latin to Medieval Spanish. This chapter also comes with an analysed sample text of Alphonsine prose and practical questions requiring the students to explain some phenomena seen in real text excerpts.

External history, phonological, as well as morphological and syntactic changes from Medieval Castilian to Modern Spanish are the topic of Chapter 7. This chapter also includes a sample text for analysis and many useful 'asides' that students and the general reader alike are bound to find interesting, as well as entertaining ('An Archaic Dialect: Sephardic' p. 144-45, 'A Linguistic Myth: The Lispering King' p. 155, 'A Linguistic Myth: The Phonemic Character of Spanish Orthography' pp. 165-66).

An exhaustive, but concise treatment of the mechanisms involved in the evolution of the Spanish lexicon is the subject of Chapter 8: the examples are very up to date (including among many others, *mamografía* and *liposucción*) and the open-ended questions really provide an opportunity for the students to carry out independent work, for instance #11 p.188 'Without consulting an etymological dictionary, identify the origin of the following slang words from León 1980. *Bodi* 'body', *cabezón* 'fifty-peseta coin with an image of Franco', *californiano* 'type of LSD', *cocacolonización* 'imposition of American customs' etc. The layout and the originality of this chapter clearly reflect that the lexicon is one of the author's areas of specialisation.

Chapter 9 on Spanish Dialectology is also characterised by the same exhaustivity and conciseness –the reader will forgive the oxymoronic juxtaposition of the two. Pharies gives a historical overview of all main dialects of Spanish (Castilian, Andalusian, Canary Islands, American Spanish, highlighting Cocoliche, Rioplatense, Andean Spanish, Caribbean Spanish, Mexico and the US Southwestern States with pronunciation, lexical, and grammatical characteristics as well as texts to exemplify them), without neglecting to mention the traditional views of how American Spanish came about (208 ff.).

The final sections are one devoted to ‘Rudiments of Spanish Phonetics and Phonology’, and a ‘Glossary of Linguistic Terms’ (followed by Maps and Indices), which are useful for the students that need a quick revision of these concepts before or during the study of the history of Spanish.

### 3. One Dissonant Note on Language Change

The first chapter, ‘Language Change’, is the one with which I have most bones to pick from an ideological, as well as a practical point of view. The inexorability, causes and mechanisms of language change are the chapter’s main topics. The chapter addresses questions of prescriptivism and conservatism of language bodies that try to limit or arrest language change, clearly an impossible task: this is a clever angle to approach the question of language change, since chastising of language habits is a topic that the students can readily relate to. The ideological bias of the book is clearly detectable in a sentence such as:

Thanks to sociolinguistics, it is now recognized that the processes whereby changes are introduced and eventually generalized in natural languages is susceptible of direct observation. (8)

On a number of occasions, Pharies highlights the importance of ‘American sociolinguistics’ (15), Labov’s work in particular, as the single most important current to explain language change. The implicit bias against generativist accounts of language change are clearly felt, if not mentioned specifically as such, in other theories about language change that Pharies criticises in this chapter.

All in all, I feel that the author does not draw enough of a distinction between two separate moments of language change, innovation and diffusion. For instance, he maintains that the quirks of Spanish compared to other Romance languages, attributed by traditional philologists to contact with bilingual speakers of different languages (p. 13) are not correctly explained in this way because ‘it is improbable that monolingual speakers of a language would change their way of speaking to imitate such bilinguals, whose strange way of speaking would hardly be considered prestigious or worthy of imitation.’ Let us take a practical and well-known example, traditionally, the aspiration of Latin /f/ to /h/ has been ascribed to a Basque-Cantabrian substratum (cf.

Lapesa 38), according to Pharies's theory, what Lapesa calls '*la repugnancia vasca por la /f/*' could not be ascribed to language contact because that type of pronunciation would not be imitated by monolingual Romance speakers as a stigmatized version of an imperfect pronunciation. Of course if bilingualism was diffuse, or if it had been in the past (as implied by the use of the word *substratum* in Lapesa rather *adstratum*), no medieval speaker of the region would find fault with the aspiration of /f/ because of the extended (contemporary or past) bilingualism, which would make that type of pronunciation the most common one, applied to words of Latin origin beginning with /f/.

Perhaps even more to the point, subjecting all types of language change to the notion of prestige is also severely limiting. Prestige does indeed apply to the notion of diffusion of certain language changes, independently of the innovative phase or of what other linguists define as 'catastrophic changes' (Lightfoot). Pharies in fact mentions what I feel is one of the most important causes of language change –'imperfect language learning in children', based on the incomplete data they are offered by adult speakers (14)– if only to discount it immediately. This view of language change is certainly the only one that can explain rapid changes occurring within one or two generations. I adopt Lightfoot's definition of 'catastrophe' in linguistic terms: 'the bumpy discrepancies that we find from time to time between the input that a child is exposed to and the output that the child's mature grammar generates.' (Lightfoot 89). Pharies fallaciously maintains that the view according to which grammars change in these bumpy and catastrophic ways can only apply to an individual child, as:

...it is difficult to see how it could explain changes in a whole speech community, since a child hears different utterances and different mistakes. It would be logical under the circumstances, to expect the eccentricities in individual speech to cancel each other out in the broader linguistic community. (14)

This argument is problematic on a number of levels: first of all, advocates of the catastrophic theory of change, such as Lightfoot (89) typically maintain that grammars hold not of entire languages, but of individual idiolects, and that only the bulking together of individual, bumpy, different idiolects into languages such as Old English, or Old Spanish for that matter, creates the illusion of the gradualness of change. Secondly, when we are considering linguistic changes, we shouldn't group them all together either, since 'linguistic variation is typically not a matter of free variance, but rather oscillation between two fixed points of divergence' (91), i.e. verb movement or not, head final grammar or not, /f/ pronounced as [f] or /f/ pronounced as [h]. Therefore, Pharies's comment above is a gross misrepresentation of what variability within the language community might be: i.e. not –as he seems to maintain– an *algarabía* of different options that would cancel one another out, but two options for

the outcome of a possible structure or form X, options that are sensitive to a 'statistically significant' input. If the amount of input provided by the parent generation is sufficiently homogenous, their children will acquire the same grammar in regard to form X, if the input is not homogenous enough, the following generation may converge on a different solution for form X than the previous one. And there would be nothing gradual about the change itself, what may be gradual is the written record, given that writing is more conservative than speech, considering the rate of diffusion from one language community to another, not to mention the lacunae in document transmission.

The same chapter continues by criticising what Pharies conceives of as a mechanistic theory of language change that identifies one of its main causes as language heterogeneity (14). His criticism revolves around the fact that this theory does not 'identify the factor that would initiate or condition the selection' of one variant over another, which as a result of randomness of selection should really cancel each other out. What Pharies is driving at, in fact, is isolating the sociolinguistic factor or 'prestige' as the main cause of language change. This argument is also problematic in different aspects. First of all, Pharies doesn't make enough of a distinction between the moment of inception of linguistic variation, which is often a simple question of articulatory effort (or decrease thereof), or of misperception –i.e. physical factors due to the architecture of our speech apparatus– and the moment of diffusion of the change to a whole linguistic community, and subsequently to others. Moreover, the diffusion, depending on the type of change, may be catastrophically quick (typical of structural changes in the grammar proper), and be complete within one or two generations –regardless of sociolinguistic factors, and rather responding to a critical mass of data in the input for the following generation of speakers, or in case of lexical diffusion it may be more gradual and subject to sociolinguistic factors. In either case, the two moments of inception and diffusion need to be kept apart, because they pertain to different language domains, inception being typically a language-internal factor due to physical and physiological properties, whereas diffusion may depend on external factors, statistics, or, indeed, on the sociolinguistic factors advocated by Pharies.

In short, I feel that students need to realise the distinction between these two important points, especially because attributing to sociolinguistic factors the main cause of language change is misleading and typologically unsound: it misses the generalizations that we see across languages of why the same changes happen time and again in unrelated languages in different periods of their history. After all, even linguists who certainly do not belong to the generativist faction that Pharies criticises, such as John Ohala, have addressed the question of why a specific change happens at a certain point of time and not another. Ohala in particular dismisses the question (1981, 1993, also see the discussion in Miglio and Moren 2003) because it is not a useful question to ask, since many small changes happen all the time within a linguistic community, but they do not spread (in this sense they die out, rather than 'cancelling each other out' in Pharies's terms). Those that spread do so because of unpredictable,

psychological or sociolinguistic factors, which are in most cases unrecoverable due to the paucity of information about the time period, and faulty record transmission. In placing the explanatory weight of language change on those irrecoverable factors, Pharies fails to distinguish between different types of changes and different phases of language change, as well as trying to entice the student towards an interest in language change based on anecdotal information, the same type of information that he wishes to debunk in the diagrams devoted to language myths in *Brief History*.

#### 4. Conclusions

Despite my criticism set out in the previous section, I have to agree with Kenneth Wireback, who quite rightly observes in a blurb on the back of *Brief History*, that Pharies's book 'successfully addresses a long-standing absence in our profession', indicating that it is the ideal book for a transition between introductory linguistics courses and more advanced diachronic studies of the language. I would like to add that, although Pharies considers it a book to be used over one whole semester (xii), it is concise enough that it can be used over one quarter. In my experience using *Brief History* as a textbook, I have found that it is the best textbook to approach a subject that has become more and more difficult to teach successfully in undergraduate degrees, especially in American universities, as our academic emphasis in Foreign Languages and Literatures Departments has moved away from philological studies towards cultural studies. Pharies's book manages to cover the rigorous philological information needed for the subject, while providing a cultural and historical supporting frame that maintains the students' interest from beginning to end.

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