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Bridging the Language Divide: St. Louis Bilingual Periodicals in the Late Nineteenth Century

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At the end of the nineteenth century, the St. Louis Spanish Club would regularly host grand events, gathering US American businesspeople and Mexican visitors alike. Some of these *veladas* were Hispanic-themed dinners, like ‘An Evening in Mexico’ where they showcased Spanish and Mexican dances with nearly 100 dancers on stage, *fumadas*, and even a ‘bull fight’: in 1895 the Overstolz residence in St. Louis was decorated in imitation of a bull ring and the guests were entertained with the staging of ‘Don Quixote’.¹ It is safe to say that the St. Louis business elite was infatuated with Mexico. The St. Louis Spanish Club and other commercial organizations like the Spanish American Commercial Exchange were working hard to promote stronger commercial relations between St. Louis and Mexico, since such relations were proving to be fruitful for the city. St. Louis businessmen saw the Mexican market as an unexplored goldmine and claimed it as theirs. However, they needed to get Mexican businesspeople on board with this commercial vision and, for that reason, periodical publications that circulated in Mexico, such as *El Comercio del Valle* (1875–93) or *Modern Mexico* (1895–1909), became an important platform for St. Louis’s imperial dreams. A contributor to the November 1896 issue of *Modern Mexico* lamented the negative image that Mexican people had of the US and reproached: ‘What have we done to impress our Mexican neighbors that we sincerely desire to sustain *more intimate trade intercourse* with them?’ (emphasis added)²

The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of eight different bilingual (Spanish-English) periodicals in St. Louis, Missouri, that shared this dream of a ‘more intimate trade intercourse’.³ These newspapers focused on the ‘discovery’ of Mexico and Latin America as a business prospect and gave its audience tools to successfully embark upon business ventures south of the border. Some of them were *Las Dos Naciones*, *Modern Mexico*, and *La Unión de América*, titles that are telling of the attempt to foster a union between the two countries. In these periodicals, readers could find news from Latin America, as well as translations of Mexico’s laws of colonization, maps of railroads, advertisements for haciendas or land for sale in Mexico, among other information useful for their commercial endeavours.

In this campaign for a stronger ‘economic friendship’ with Mexico, overcoming the English-Spanish divide was deemed a key concern, since, in the words of one of the editors, ‘we cannot successfully conduct business with these people while we lack

1 Geo T. Parker, ‘The St. Louis Spanish Club: An Organization that is Accomplishing Much in the Way of Trade’, *Modern Mexico* (September 1895), 11.

2 Thomas Ryan, untitled article, *Modern Mexico* (November 1896), p. 5.

3 Nicolás Kanellos and Helvetia Martell, *Hispanic Periodicals in the United States, Origins to 1960: A Brief History and Comprehensive Bibliography* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2000), p. 288.

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the necessary knowledge of their language, through which alone can be learned their wants'.⁴ The issue of language was a common topic in articles and editorials which often advocated for the teaching of Spanish in public schools, instead of a European language like French or German, or urged young businessmen to travel to Mexico and learn the language and culture in order to effectively conduct business with their neighbours:

We have recently urged upon the young men of the United States the value and importance of to them of studying the Spanish language. When we consider that it is spoken by not fewer than 60,000,000 of people of whom 45,000,000 are co-occupants with us on this continent, that every day brings us nearer and into more intimate relationship with them [...] no further argument need be presented to the reader of average intelligence [...].⁵

For US American businessmen, truly understanding the desires of Mexican people was central for the success of this commercial friendship, and linguistic knowledge was underscored as a key medium to achieve this goal. In this context, the newspaper was a particularly fruitful platform as it materially and linguistically performed the expansion that the St. Louis business elite desired to see. While these bilingual newspapers aimed to put Mexico and the US in linguistic and material proximity, and enthusiastically promoted the learning of Spanish, they were discursively constructing Spanish and Spanish speakers as something foreign and external to an Anglo-American United States. This erased the fact that it was the native language of many US citizens who were forced to exercise their citizenship and nationhood in a conditioned way, as Rosina Lozano has compellingly argued in *An American Language*.⁶

St. Louis's bilingual newspapers emerged during the 'economic turn' of the Monroe Doctrine, as the United States aimed to gain economic control over the Western Hemisphere. As such, they testify to the importance of periodical publications for the US imperial project. In his study *St. Louis & Empire*, Henry Berger traces the city's 'imperious economic activity' back to its origins at the intersection of the French, Spanish, and US empires. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, St. Louis's primacy was being challenged by the railway system and new economic urban centers like Chicago. It is around this period that the business elite of St. Louis looked to open a new market in Latin America.⁷ According to the editor of *El Comercio del Valle*, John Cahill — or Juan Cahill, as he called himself — St. Louis had 'a superior claim to the trade of the Mississippi Valley, the southwest, Mexico and beyond and should not yield it'.⁸ The material and linguistic possibilities of the bilingual newspaper were not inconsequential for Cahill's commercial dreams.

To understand the challenges and nuances of the 'linguistic bridging' in these bilingual periodicals, it is important to refer to its political context. The US-Mexico War (1846–48) was still fresh in collective memory. The war intensified an anti-Mexican discourse about its political and racial inferiority. The Mexican subject was racialized as inherently different from the Anglo-American subject, and so was the Spanish language. Thus, US businessmen would have to confront that racialization when promoting commercial exchange and free-trade treaties with Mexico and Latin America. They

4 'Learn Spanish', *El Comercio del Valle* (January 1889), 1.

5 Ibid.

6 Rosina Lozano, *An American Language: The History of Spanish in the United States* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

7 Henry W. Berger, *St. Louis and Empire: 250 Years of Imperial Quest and Urban Crisis* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015), p. 52.

8 Quoted in Berger, p. 59.

had to portray Mexico as a nation modern and dignified enough to engage with commercially, while at the same time maintaining a hierarchical difference. Bilingual periodicals figured prominently in how that racialization was restructured in terms favourable to their economic and political project. My research looks to these periodicals as a window onto the complex cultural, political, and linguistic transactions at this time.

There is a clear trend among these publications to promote the learning of both Spanish language and ‘Hispanic culture’ (whatever that is), as a way to better connect with the Mexican subject. This goal was being promoted through the publications themselves, which, by being bilingual, exposed English-speaking readers to Spanish. In the case of *El Comercio*, the promotion of Spanish was even more direct. A recurring ad in *El Comercio* asked the reader ‘¿QUIERE VD. HABLAR ESPAÑOL?’ and offered, free of charge, a copy of the language learning method *Spanish at a Glance* (1884): ‘A copy of this most useful book *will be sent by mail free* to every new subscriber to *El Comercio del Valle* [...] Send in your orders at once.’ (emphasis in original)⁹ To argue for the importance of the Spanish language, the ad referred to the words of none other than Thomas Jefferson:

Read What Thos. Jefferson Advises. One hundred years ago the Father of the Declaration of American Independence wrote as follows: ‘Bestow great attention on this language and endeavor to acquire an accurate knowledge of it. Our connections to Spain and Spanish-America will render it a valuable acquisition.’

Once more, it is possible to observe an awareness of the connections that the United States held with Spanish-America. There is a recognition of being ‘co-occupants’ of the same continent, yet, not of the same country. Implied in the desire to connect across the differences was the presence of a cultural border, one that essentially separated an *Anglo-America* from a *Spanish-America* and that negated those who existed in-between.

The example of St. Louis’s bilingual periodicals reiterates the need for research frameworks that account for multilingual, multicultural, and transnational cultural realities within the Americas throughout the nineteenth century. Through the study of language, linguistic difference, and racialization in these periodicals it is possible to shed light on the history of Spanish in the US, and its importance in the economic imperial project of the end of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, it can illuminate the presence of Spanish in other spheres of society, like education, translation, or language of governance in the Southwest. Although these bilingual newspapers avidly advocated for the learning of Spanish in their crusade for economic expansion throughout the Americas, they reinforced the idea of Spanish as culturally foreign to the US national project. This process of linguistic othering further alienated the many US citizens that were native speakers of Spanish and who existed across these cultural and imperial borders. These tensions and negotiations strongly shaped US-Mexico cultural relations during the nineteenth century.

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⁹ ‘¿QUIERE VD. APRENDER ESPAÑOL?’, *El Comercio del Valle* (March 1889), 5.

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