

Linguistics in the labor market: the case of Mexico

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In this paper, we discuss the prevailing general situation concerning linguistics as a profession in Mexico, in which five strategical points to be considered in the curriculum of different university programs are set forth: social importance of linguistics in a global world, curriculum, matriculation, faculty, and teaching-research. The guiding point is that new possibilities of applied linguistics are to be found so that this domain becomes a real option for making a living.

Undoubtedly, linguistics -in its phase of application- can help us to know, understand, and solve many human needs in the short and long term. Nevertheless, the spectrum of educational objectives in the curriculum is reduced, and not meeting its great natural potential becomes a serious risk. Still, we need to identify some other applications for this profession, at the same time as we reconsider and redistribute the adequate existing ones. Teaching (mother or foreign languages) and researching (native languages as well as some other concerns related to linguistic theories and policies) both currently represent the central point of the application of linguistics, whereas the translation area, the sciences of communication, editorial field, tourism, as well as neurolinguistics, are placed second.

We face the urgency of defining an approach which allows us to go beyond theoretical and disciplinary matters. Thus, academic formation is at risk of not meeting the requirements of professional instruction, in the sense of the exploitation of certain knowledge and abilities as a way of earning one's living. Consequently, linguistics does not sell in the labor market; that means, there is no employment- beyond the positions offered by the educational and researching institutions- for the graduates of these academic programs, as it occurs in the case of the graduates of other areas (economic-administrative sciences, law, health sciences, engineering, for example). In short, there is not full awareness of the multiple applications for this profession. In the labor market, needs to be satisfied by linguists have not been fully detected; their role is not clear for all the social sectors. Therefore it is perceived that the work done by linguists is highly devalued.

1 Social importance of Linguistics in a global world

As mentioned before, the most popular field for practicing linguistics, after having finished the five-year degree course, is foreign (and/or mother) language teaching. Here we meet an evident and naturally recurrent point: the growing economic, political and intercultural relationships among countries demand better trained technical human resources, with greater communicative abilities in all areas of knowledge. However, globalization implies more assorted schemata for human interaction, and linguistics is a

generous source for new study and problem-solving models. These models turn out to be useful for all the social sectors, especially if we start from the assumption that languages are necessary in all fields of knowledge. For example, the negotiations for a commercial treaty among countries imply the use of words and syntagms whose semantic and pragmatic precision must be absolutely well understood by the parties. In such a case, an expert on discourse analysis and on the language of negotiation turns out to be essential as a consultant and/or revisor of the documents to be signed. In the legislative field, a specialist or expert on the different meanings of any given word or expression to be incorporated into the Constitution and/or resulting laws, should help to delimit and specify its use considering the cultural and social contexts in force. In the legal profession, due to the absence of linguistic analysis regarding sworn statements and legal texts, there are many unfair pronounced sentences recorded; thus, counting on a linguist would facilitate more accurate interpretations or explanations of the many aspects dealing with the real intention of the statements. In addition, the companies devoted to the development of software would benefit from the help of a professional linguist when designing codes which synthesize the various cultural and linguistic features of the social sectors at which the computer programs are targeted.

All the above are only a few examples showing the need of having exclusive positions for language professionals, since the fast-growing changes in the lives of human beings result in many necessities to be satisfied by means of the application of this discipline; the goal is to detect them.

2 Curriculum

Angel Díaz Barriga (1994) considers it necessary to study the need of carrying out a comprehensive research to fund the construction of the curriculum and to define, in an objective way, the relevance of the real options and possibilities of employment within the framework of globalization, not only with the sole intention of meeting the requirements established by the ruling bodies in the universities, or the Higher Education and Scientific Investigation Sub-secretary. Starting from the acceptance and practice of this idea, we would have a clear judgment about the different professional applications of linguistics, and we would be—consequently—ready to meet the challenge of training human resources to satisfy the needs previously detected. In this way, a coordinated offer on the part of the higher education institutions would represent a potential solution.

Real knowledge of the labor market, as well as good planning to enhance further collaboration among educational institutions, would facilitate the task of proposing the professional profile each program would be responsible for. Thus, instead of having programs competing among each other, we would count on a network of numerous options for the professional training of linguists. This network would undertake particular problems not only of the theoretical type, but also practical ones. And all that we have mentioned here would be to the advantage of the incorporation of linguists in the labor market.

It is relevant to say that faculty's involvement and participation are fundamental to the achievement of a revised linguist's profile and the elaboration of the curriculum. To do so, it is important for all of them to count on the corresponding investigations' output and on certain training in the field of curricula design. In the same regard, adopting the

coordinated-programs schema would also imply providing ourselves with the necessary means (infrastructure, equipment, services, etc.) to ensure their optimal operation and the achievement of goals and objectives.

On the other hand, establishing permanent connections between linguistic activity and the different employers is vital. But before doing so, what is required is a sensitizing, training, and educational process about the profession we are discussing today. This means that there will be much hard work to be done in order to achieve a mutual exchange of knowledge, but only in this way may we revert enterprise's lack of reliability on higher education institutions in general (Rubio, 1998), and in the humanities. It will be necessary to show that the study and knowledge of language as a communicative system is not reduced to the abstract as opposed to the concrete, but it can be helpful and useful in both ways. Paraphrasing Carlo Brumat Hacker (1998), we could say that linguistic knowledge has become too important an issue to keep it solely at the educational level. Therefore, believing that there is no relationship of the linguistic programs with the creation of wealth would be an error.

The previous actions should be complemented with the comparative analysis of the linguistics curriculum in the countries that participate of commercial treaties. As Angel Díaz Barriga (1994) says: "it is not a matter of imitating any other approaches, but a matter of analyzing their value, coherence and significance." To do so, they would be taken as the comparative axis of, at least, the five elements that are being presented in this paper. By doing so, we would count on greater references to locate linguists' professional instruction process within the international framework, as we "face our national reality" (Ibid).

As shown, the central proposal in this section is the curriculum design based on professional and academic competence, as well as on theoretical-disciplinary knowledge. Professors, students, and graduates involved in the current academic programs should start actions which allow them to identify the social impact of those programs, and if necessary to improve them or propose alternate ones. Considering Linguistics within the different areas of its professional application implies a deep revision. An alternative to doing so is the opening of discussion forums to trigger collective reflection based on the study of the labor market, the monitoring of graduates, interdisciplinary readings, new technology, academic exchange programs, practicums, foreign languages, axiomatic formation, etc.

3 Matriculation

The number of available spots in academic programs in Linguistics is constrained by some aspects such as infrastructure, the scarce number of professors, and the low interest this career raises among potential applicants (Bocchieri, 1995). There is special pressure on the academic programs that have included foreign language learning as part of the curricula; this fact reflects the need for the individuals who seek a diploma to count on more valuable knowledge to meet the expectations of the labor market. It is not necessary to wait for the year 2020 to come to prove that both students and graduates expect to secure their personal development and improve their standard of living, as a natural consequence of their high education training.¹

¹ 2020 is the reference point for many foresight studies.

The fact that there are fewer than ten academic programs in Linguistics in Mexico, and that they hold less than 1% of the total matriculation for degree courses throughout the country, is a piece of evidence that linguistics in general is not considered part of any money-making professional field -the realm the government has been especially interested in directing the growing demand since the mid 1970s (Muñoz, 1995). Of course, linguistics has not been considered such a priority career so as to be highly financed, in terms of institutional budget and promotion (by means of scholarships and credits for poorer students, for example).

All the above ends up as a contradictory situation: in spite of the very low demand, the restriction of spaces has been observed². The problem is the lack of vision about the potential effectiveness linguistics has in benefit of the economic and social machinery³. Once this weakness has been overcome, greater interest in this type of career will be shown, and financing on the part of non-governmental sources will be achieved. Then, we will be able to implement mechanisms which allow us diversify the educational offer in a coordinated manner so as to expand the coverage. As a consequence of the diversified educational offer, both curricular flexibility and the implementation of a long distance learning system will be greatly justified. Also, the effectiveness rate and long term efficiency— based on an optimal advisory system and correlated supporting programs- will raise.

For student selection mechanisms, new proposals should accompany the projected progress. The criteria currently used should be revised and adapted to our reality today. That is to say, the aspects to be evaluated in the individuals who will demand job positions, as they do in the present, will not be necessarily the same. For example, job interviews will become even more important than aptitude tests; literacy abilities, as well as basic specific knowledge, will be proved by means of written papers; reference letters tend to disappear. On the other hand, if the coordinated educational offer system is adopted, standard rules for students to register in any educative institutions must be implemented, so that the applicants can complete paperwork procedures in any branch office throughout the country⁴. Nevertheless, in the spirit of conceiving and designing more appropriate mechanism, a larger number of participants will need to be involved by means of the opening of discussion forums on college admission policies, since "selecting applicants to enroll in higher education programs is a very delicate process, because it implies the hard decision of determining many persons' future" (Bocchieri, 1995).

4 Faculty

Securing academic degrees, faculty formation- from an interdisciplinary perspective (teaching, humanistic values, ecology, new technology, etc.)- and improving labor conditions (better salaries, allocation of equipment and appropriate spaces, balanced workloads, etc.) are some of the aspects included in the institutional planning to

² Crowded classrooms are common in many cases.

³ In the U. S., job positions in different government areas and industry are commonly offered to linguists. For example, State Department, Defense Secretary, CIA, FBI, IBM, Microsoft.

⁴ Just like Chile's intercollege selection system does.

strengthen a faculty's performance. In the same vein, to speed up paperwork, educational policies should be implemented, as well as dynamic updating and professionalization programs, applicable in and by the same institution in order to enlarge the feasibility of higher degree obtaining, and which are founded on non-coercive monitoring and feedback systems. Eduardo Stein (1998) wrote: "Faculty is the spine of the educational phenomenon, without professional and pedagogical training it will be impossible to reach quality at all". Therefore this approach becomes the base for a true improvement in the development not only of the curriculum, but also of the students' academic performance.

Therefore, to hire professors in the linguistic academic programs, expertise, knowledge, instructional ability, and attitude on the required instruction and on the didactic aspects of teaching must be taken into account. On this same matter, it is necessary that universities, through a specialized department, offer obligatory, free, and permanent teaching instruction programs. These programs must not involve traveling long distances or leaving the workplace for long periods of time. Our aim is not to make them experts on pedagogy but to provide them with useful tools to accomplish appropriately their function in the learning process.

This idea may lead us to think about a personnel selection program designed and applied by the principal of the school, his/her collaborators, and experts on linguistics and pedagogy, in order to ensure the appropriate inclusion of the elements mentioned before.

On the other hand, a smart campaign to sensitize and train the professors who are currently part of the faculty should be implemented. It is about inviting them to overcome prejudices of any type and old practices in their teaching. Ana Luiza Machado (2000) suggests a good reason in this same spirit: "Training new capabilities for a more developed society implies having professors with different characteristics from the ones they observe in the present". Once they are convinced that teaching is a means of professionalizing linguistics, just like any another discipline, professors will primarily seek to become true professionals. This means becoming aware that the function of any professor not only is to teach those who do not know, but also -and most important of all- to stimulate the learning process in the persons who build up their future on a profession - in this case, linguistics. We agree with Machado (Ibid) when she says that "nothing can be proposed nor changed at school, if teachers do not change first." Of course, such a change will hardly occur if we do not count on the appropriate conditions.

There are some other inherent ways to the statements we have presented here. For example, in order to make possible the optimal use of new technologies and, consequently, the updating of information, we must count on specialized training, especially if we take into account that the most professors, whose average age is between 35 and 40, were not educated in an environment as technology-oriented as the one that currently reigns in all the school levels. Also, we must encourage academic degree achievement through less complex institutional programs⁵. Some other alternative ways of achieving a real improvement are: promoting educational exchange among foreign and national institutions, as part of updating programs; defining the criteria or profile for potential new personnel based on an extensive range of professional applications of

⁵ In programmes like Professor Improvement Programme (PROMEP [Spanish abbreviation]), bureaucratic procedures have provoked a significant number of master and doctorate degree candidates to try other mechanisms to achieve their objective.

linguistics and curriculum content; establishing contact with other linguists, either within the country or foreign, who hold experienced knowledge about the different social sectors for the exchange of ideas or assesment; establishing salary tabs resembling those of different professional fields; promoting a high and true sense of responsibility and social commitment among professors and authorities; promoting planning habits and individual evaluation (schedule personal goals and observe them) by means of appropriate training courses, etc.

5 Teaching-Research

Professors must acquire the profile of researcher because there is a general assumption that researching, whether it is basic, applied or action research, is a crucial element in increasing teaching quality. Even so, there are people who take this conception to the extreme: "no teacher can be good unless the teacher is a good researcher" (UNESCO, 1998). The truth is that we should accept that we find ourselves in a context where knowledge is the most appreciated product in the multiple spheres of human life, since wealth depends on it. Axel Didriksson (1997) indicates: "The capability of any country depends on the largest economic and social exploitation of knowledge generated by the higher education institutions". The clearest piece of evidence of this phenomenon is that higher education institutions must fight to get more resources, mainly via knowledge generation and transmission. In fact, researching and abundant editorial works have become an important political capital. The same occurs at the individual level. Those professors who have published work have greater recognition in the inside of the institution (authorities, faculty, and students), and they can get better salaries, greater support and incentives above any other professor. They usually exert some academic leadership which usually becomes a political one and makes them natural candidates for higher positions in the university administration, etc. However, it is evident that any professor who does research will count on more elements to contribute to higher quality education, especially if such quality is accompanied by a touch of didactic-pedagogical instruction. Besides, we should consider it the most efficient means of updating and optimizing the preofession.

It is necessary to say that concerning the Linguistics curriculum, the institutional requirements with respect to research should be complemented with efficient instruments to overcome faculty's weaknesses. Here we have a few options of doing so: graduate training will provide them with the necessary methodological elements and instruments to design and develop projects to generate true significant knowledge, the mechanisms of support must be optimized (especially in universities in the province), keeping a balanced perspective concerning teaching and research duties, a fair number of students in the classroom, appropriate salaries to gain the condition of exclusiveness for professors, founding any expectation for further research on an adequate promotion, counting on infrastructure, equipment, services, domestic and overseas inter-institutional agreements, extensive promotion programs, etc., are also key alements. If we count on those elements, the professors' apparent lack of interest in this activity will decrease.

On the other hand, within every academic linguistics programme a smart campaign to sensitize professors and link research projects with society's real practical needs should be implemented. This can be achieved by enlarging the spectrum of research subjects and applications; that means that we should avoid at any coast building

an "ivory tower" where research will take refuge. Of course, it is not a matter of reviving the science *versus* ideology fight that used to characterize Mexican universities in the past; on the contrary, we want to foster research with a pragmatic spirit. This challenge implies the integration of multidisciplinary groups to enrich the theoretical perspective. Thus, we will be able to define new dynamics between linguistic science and labor needs, and design new mechanisms to facilitate the insertion of graduates into the labor market.

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