The collection of Spanish proverbs in Los Angeles (California)[3]

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Abstract

Abstract: Shirley L. Arora presents the results of a field work on the proverbs used by the Spanish speakers of several generations in Los Angeles; a few hundred of informants, mostly of Mexican origin, took part in the survey. On the basis of the material collected, 3300 proverbs, it can be inferred that the most frequently used are of Spanish origin, documented in several works: the *Diccionario de refranes* of Juana G. Campos and Ana Barella (1975) which contains the proverbs included by the *Real Academia de la Lengua Española* in its *Diccionario de la lengua española* until the mid-20th, the *Vocabulario de refranes* of Gonzalo Correas (1627) and the section "El refranero hoy" by Julia Sevilla Muñoz (journal *Paremia*, no 3 and 5). It can be said that the material collected also includes Mexican-American proverbs. In addition, the study reviews a few aspects concerning the frequent use of the proverbs in the population of Los Angeles that reflects the desire to protect their own culture as against the dominant one.

Keywords: Paremiology. Proverb. Latin America. Mexico. Los Angeles.

Resumen

Título: «El refranero español en Los Ángeles (California)».

Shirley L. Arora presenta los resultados de un trabajo de campo sobre los refranes utilizados por los hispanohablantes de varias generaciones en Los Ángeles; en la encuesta participaron unos mil informantes, en su mayoría de origen mexicano. Del material recogido, 3300 refranes, se deduce que los más empleados son de procedencia española y están documentados en varias obras: el *Diccionario de refranes* de Juana G. Campos y Ana Barella (1975), donde se recogen los refranes incluidos por la Real Academia de la Lengua Española en su *Diccionario de la lengua española* hasta mediados del siglo XX, el *Vocabulario de refranes* de Gonzalo Correas (1627) y la sección «El refranero hoy» elaborada por Julia Sevilla Muñoz (revista *Paremia*, n.° 3 y 5). Asimismo, se recopilan refranes de origen mexicano-americano. Además, se llevan a cabo consideraciones sobre el uso frecuente de los refranes en la población de Los Ángeles, debido sobre todo al deseo de proteger la cultura propia frente a la dominante.

Palabras Clave: Paremiología. Refrán. Hispanoamérica. México. Los Ángeles.

Résumé

Titre : « Les proverbes espagnols à Los Ángeles (Californie) ».

Shirley L. Arora présente les résultats d'un travail de terrain sur les proverbes employés par les hispanophones de plusieurs générations à Los Ángeles; mille informateurs environs ont participé à l'enquête, la plupart étant mexicain d'origine. Le recueil de ces 3300 proverbes permet de conclure que les plus employés sont de provenance espagnole et sont attestés dans plusieurs répertoires: le *Diccionario de refranes* [Dictionnaire de proverbes] de Juana G. Campos et Ana Barella (1975), qui reprend les proverbes cités par l'Académie Royale Espagnole dans son *Diccionario de la lengua española* [Dictionnaire de la langue espagnole] jusqu'à la moitié du XX^{e} siècle, le *Vocabulario de refranes* [Vocabulaire de proverbes] de Gonzalo Correas (1627) et la section «El refranero hoy» [Les proverbes d'aujourd'hui] élaborée par Julia Sevilla Muñoz (revue *Paremia*,

Mots-clés : Parémiologie. Proverbe. Amérique latine. Mexique. Los Angeles.

[3] Translation of the article published in *Paremia*, 6, 1997, 67-76.

n.° 3 et 5). Cette étude mentionne aussi des proverbes d'origine mexico-américaine, et se penche sur l'emploi fréquent des proverbes chez les habitants de Los Angeles, en raison surtout du désir de protéger leur propre culture face à la culture dominante.

For some thirty years –from the mid-1940s to the late 1970s– a huge project of collecting current proverbs in the United States and certain contiguous provinces of Canada was carried out under the auspices of the American Society of Dialectology. In this project not only members of the Society of Dialectology collaborated, but also school teachers, students of all levels, and countless individuals who learned about the project and offered to help with the task. This project resulted in the newly-appeared *Dictionary of American Proverbs*, which was led by our distinguished colleague Wolfgang Mieder as principal, with the collaboration of Professors Stewart Kingsbury and Kelsie Harder. The dictionary contains some 15,000 proverbs with their variants, all of them directly from the oral tradition, that is, from informants who used them or at least knew and remembered them; it represents, therefore, the maximum source for the study of current proverbs and proverbs among the English-speaking American population.

But the United States is by no means a monolingual country. On the contrary, we have always been and still are –today more than ever– a multilingual country, and it is not strange to find, amongst the multiplicity of languages we speak, that the main one –after English– is Spanish. This language was in California and in many other parts of the country, the first European language to be established, anticipating, and by far, the introduction and then the predominance of English. Of all the fifty states in the country, California still has the highest concentration of people of Hispanic origin: the most recent official census indicates a Hispanic population of almost eight million, or a quarter of the state's population, and in and around Los Angeles there are about five million, or a third of the metropolitan population. There are other states (New Mexico, for example) where there is a greater proportion of Hispanics, but not where there is a larger number. According to statistical projections, within fifty years, more than half the population of the state of California will be of Hispanic origin - which does not necessarily mean being Spanish-speaking, because unfortunately a significant proportion of that population will no longer speak Spanish. And I say "unfortunately" because there are many –myself among them– who lament the disappearance of bilingualism among our young people of Hispanic descent as a great loss in every sense economically, culturally, and personally.

All these data I bring to account to explain the reasons that gave rise, precisely in the years when the compilation phase of the project of the Society of American Dialectology was ending, to a similar survey, albeit on a much more modest scale, on the collection of Spanish proverbs in Los Angeles. Of course, that "collection of Spanish proverbs" is no more than a concise way of proverb "the current proverbs among Spanish speakers, whatever their origin may be", although it is true –and it would be no surprise– that in the great majority of cases, perhaps some 80 percent, those proverbs are Spanish, in the sense that they have arrived to America along with the language of Cervantes.

The Spanish-speaking population of Los Angeles is very diverse, though dominated, as one might suppose, by the Mexican or Mexican-American element (i.e., Chicano, a term preferred above all among young people). According to the official census more than eighty percent of the Hispanic population are of Mexican descent, although in recent years there has been a notable increase in the number of individuals from other Spanish-speaking countries, especially Central America. The press and politicians, in search of some comfortable term to designate this heterogeneous Spanish-speaking population, have called them "Latinos", term that has replaced the term "hispano" or "hispánico" –*Hispanic*– which is the "official" term used in the national census but that implies for many a Spanish peninsular origin, no matter how remote it may be. There are those

who complain that any uniform term, applied to such a diverse population, takes away everyone's ethnic cultural identity, because obviously being Mexican is not the same as being Cuban or Panamanian or Argentinean or Spanish (because Spaniards can also be included among "Latinos", if it is based –as often happens– only on the surname). Those who complain are right, but no one has so far been able to come up with another term that satisfies everyone.

From the point of view of a proverb research project, the presence of such a diverse population brings quite obvious advantages. A comparative study can be undertaken without leaving the confines of the city of Los Angeles (and I must confess that, from a personal point of view, this was an enormous advantage in the years when it was difficult, for family reasons, for me to be away from home for the long periods of time that any such study in a foreign country entailed). But this environment also offers other advantages perhaps less expected, but not less important, the main among them being the possibility of observing and studying the function of the proverbs outside of what could be considered its normal environment –perhaps ideal– of a more or less stable and homogeneous community, whose inhabitants share a long linguistic and cultural tradition and therefore a wide repertoire of proverbs and other paremiological elements. I will return to this subject, which is of great interest to me, after offering some general data and comments on the current state of our project on the collection of Spanish proverbs in Los Angeles.

Up to now, a thousand informants have collaborated in the project, 57 percent of whom are women. They represent 18 Spanish-speaking American regions, plus Spain itself, the Philippines, and the Judeo-Spanish tradition, Paraguay being the one country still missing. It is obvious that in some cases the representation is minimal –there is only one Filipino informant, for example– and that Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, or Chicanos, who together make up 46 percent of the total, predominate. There are those who have contributed with only one proverb –or perhaps two or three– and there are people who have been able to provide us with up to two hundred. For each proverb, the informant or informants are identified by a number assigned to protect their anonymity (thus complying with the rules of the University that governs projects of this type) but pointing out some biographical data such as their sex, age, ancestry, residence in the United States, etc. This procedure gives us some idea of the frequency with which each proverb has been registered and of the variants –sometimes slight, sometimes significant– that predominate in each region represented by the informants. So far we have a collection of some 3300 proverbs (not counting the variants that do not deviate significantly from the basic form) and we have finished the fieldwork phase, although we find it difficult to resist when we continue providing more examples. The collection has generally been based on personal interviews, avoiding the use of questionnaires or lists of examples that might affect the content of the collection or the way a proverb is registered. We have tried to find out in each case how the informant interprets the proverb, but it is worth confessing that it has not always been feasible to follow this ideal; in a few cases we have been able to note the use of some proverb in the conversational context, but in most cases we have to resort to the informant to describe to us a "typical" context or –preferably– a context remembered from his or her own experience. Finally, for all the proverbs collected, we have looked for bibliographical notes that give us an idea of the world distribution and the variation of each one of them, a task that we hope will facilitate the international study of the Spanish proverbs in the future.

We have not sought in this project the longed-for but elusive "proverbial minimum" in Spanish, but we have gathered, as already indicated, data on the frequency with which each proverb has been recorded among our informants. The most frequent –and by far– is "Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres" (Tell me who you go with and I will tell you who you are). A proverb collected from one hundred and seventy-three people, from 20 different regions; the second –pointed one hundred and thirteen times– is "Más vale pájaro en mano que cien volando" (Better a bird in the

hand, then hundred flying) (with its variants). I continue with the list, in order of frequency, of proverbs gathered more than sixty times[4].

Al que madruga Dios le ayuda (97)
Perro que ladra no muerde (92)
No hay mal que por bien no venga (88)
A caballo regalado no se le mira el diente (88)
El que mucho abarca poco aprieta (87)
En boca cerrada no entran moscas (87)
Ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente (85)
No por mucho madrugar amanece más temprano (73)
Más sabe el diablo por viejo que por diablo (71)
En casa del herrero cuchillo [asador, azadón, etc.] de palo (69)
De tal palo tal astilla (67)
Más vale tarde que nunca (63)
Aunque la mona se vista de seda, mona se queda (61)

I believe the list offers no surprise. They are all proverbs of Spanish origin, some of international distribution. All of them can be found in the *Diccionario de refranes*, compiled by Juana G. Campos and Ana Barella and published by the *Real Academia Española*, which collects the proverbs previously included by the Academy in its *Diccionario de la lengua española* and, with only one exception, they already appear in the *Vocabulario de refranes y frases proverbiales* by Gonzalo Correas, that is to say, they were already circulating in the first decades of the 17th century and are undoubtedly, for the most part, much older[5].

In order to find among the list of the most frequent proverbs in Los Angeles a proverb that does not come from Spain, it is necessary to descend to the second level, in other words, to those registered between 30 and 60 times:

Agua que no has de beber, déjala correr (59)
Camarón que se duerme se lo lleva la corriente (52)
Cuando el río suena, piedras lleva (45)
Amor de lejos, amor de pendejos (45).
Más vale andar solo que mal acompañado (44)
El que nace para tamal, del cielo le caen las hojas (43)
El que con lobos anda, a aullar se enseña (43)
No hay mal que dure cien años, ni cuerpo que lo resista (40)[6]
Haz bien sin mirar a quien (39)
El que a buen árbol se arrima, buena sombra le cae encima (39)
Cada oveja con su pareja (39)
Tanto va el cántaro a la fuente que al fin se rompe (35)
Del dicho al hecho hay mucho trecho (35)
El que a hierro mata, a hierro muere (34)
Caras vemos, corazones no sabemos (34)

[4] I include in these data the variants that do not differ so much from the basic form as to constitute, in my opinion, a different proverb. Variations are sometimes minimal ("En boca cerrada no entran moscas" / "En boca cerrada no entra mosca"), but in other more important cases ("En casa del blacksmith, azadón/asador/cuchillo de palo").

[5] The exception is "De tal palo, tal astilla", which, if it appears in the collection of Correas, will be in some variant that I have not been able to locate.

[6] The basic form, "No hay mal que dure cien años", appears 14 additional times.

El muerto al hoyo y el vivo al bollo (38)[7]
Árbol que crece torcido jamás su tronco endereza (32)
Más vale malo conocido que bueno por conocido (30)
El que no oye consejo no llega a viejo (30)

Of the twenty proverbs of this second group, fifteen appear in the Academy's proverbs, but only ten in Gonzalo Correas' collection, and in the case of three of these no documentation has been found so far in Spain[8]. All three are considered by Dario Rubio to be 'Mexican', i.e. not of Spanish origin –a criterion he uses to include them in his valuable collection *Refranes, proverbios y dichos y dicharachos mexicanos*. Among the three, the most interesting example will be "El que nace para tamal, del cielo le caen las hojas" (Rubio 1940: I, 41), for its incorporation of a neatly American word (I see that the word "tamal" appears as Americanism in the RAE, with the def inition of "species pasty of corn flour dough, wrapped in banana leaves or corn cob and steamed or baked in the oven", and perhaps tamales also arrived in Spain). The proverb itself belongs to a fairly extensive family of expressions that comment on the supposed effect of fate on the life of the individual, whether in a positive or negative sense. (For Rubio, for example, this proverb indicates that certain individuals are born destined to be blessed in everything they do, automatically receiving everything necessary for them to succeed and be happy; but many researchers and informants, apparently convinced that being "tamal" is not an enviable destiny, interpret it in a more negative way, as an indication that the individual, no matter how hard he or she tries, cannot overcome or improve his or her destiny in life). We have gathered this proverb, as might be expected, mainly from Mexican informants or of Mexican descent: but it is also known in other American regions, among them Cuba, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador. It was also provided to us, in Los Angeles, by a Spanish informant, born in Navarre but living in the United States –in New Mexico and later in California– for more than 55 years, and I suppose that his knowledge of the proverb reflects this long period of contact with the Mexican or Mexican-American tradition, since I have not yet found any bibliographic annotation indicating that the proverb has been introduced into the peninsular tradition, although the basic formula[9] is known.

The other two proverbs considered "Mexican" by Rubio represent less clear cases, because although they lack, until now, documentation that indicates their peninsular traditionality, they do not contain obviously exotic elements, so to speak. "Amor de lejos, amor de pendejos" (1, 45), with its somewhat softened variants, such as "Amor de lejos, amor de cangrejos" or "Amor de lejos, amor de pen...sarse", etc., has a distribution analogous to that of "El que nace para tamal...". And it seems to enjoy a special popularity among our Mexican-American or Chicano informants. I haven't found it so far in any Spanish collection, not even in those rather popular proverbs that continue to be published from time to time and that sometimes give us some idea of the current proverbial repertoire that we can't get if we limit ourselves to classic proverbs or to those that

[7] In half of these cases, the word "bollo" is replaced by "pollo".

[8] In a fourth case, the "peninsular" documentation seems to be limited to the Judeo-Spanish tradition. I recognize that all these observations are based on bibliographic resources that cannot be considered to be complete, and that printed documentation in general is lagging behind current oral tradition. In addition, it would not be unreasonable for some sayings of Hispanic American origin to be introduced into the peninsular tradition through immigrants or literary sources.

[9] Cf. "El que ha de ser burro de carga, del cielo le albarda" (Sbarbi 167). "El que nace para buey, del cielo le cae la yunta" (Tapia 30). For other examples from Spain, and many more from Latin America, see my study entitled "'El que nace para tatual...': A Study in Proverb Patterning", *Folklore Américas* 28 (1968). 55-76, but especially pp. 69-71. A continuation of the study appears under the title "The 'El que nace' Proverbs: A Supplement", *Journal of Latin American Lore I* (1975), 185-198; see in particular pp. 187-188 and 191.

are mainly prepared for the use of paremiologists. In spite of this lack of documentation, some people here in Madrid have told me that they know the proverb, although they do not go so far as to say that they use it in their own conversation. I therefore find the situation with regard to this proverb somewhat ambiguous, as does that of the third member of this small group of "Mexican" proverbs. "Caras vemos, corazones no sabemos" (I, 82). We have collected this twice in the mouths of Spanish informants in Los Angeles, but without finding any documentation indicating its circulation in Spain. Its distribution in America (which includes some variants) extends from the Spanish-speaking regions of the United States to Chile and Argentina, which might suggest a Spanish origin despite the lack of documentation, and I would not be surprised to confirm it one day. For the moment, however, we must grant, with Rubio, the possibility of an American origin.

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