

## Old and New Issues in Spanish Dialectology: The Venezuelan Data

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Spanish dialectology has traditionally tended to be dichotomic: Peninsular versus American, conservative versus radical, lowland versus highland, etc. In other words, many dialectal taxonomies have been oversimplistic. New insights from linguistic theory as well as richer data, particularly from the American varieties, have led to a more complex approach to this problem. This paper will deal with the 'conservative' versus 'radical' dichotomy in the light of recent studies on Venezuelan Spanish (cf. Obediente 1998a, 1998b; Villamizar 1998; G. Chela-Flores 1998a, 1998b), which shed a different light on this dialectal division backed by previous work (see, for instance, Fernández Sevilla 1980: 457; Rosenblat 1984: 227; Montes Giraldo 1982: 124, 1996: 135).

The bipartition 'conservative' versus 'radical' is closely linked to geography because the American Spanish-speaking highlands have conservative phonological characteristics – mainly strong postvocalic consonants – while the lowlands tend towards the opposite, namely weak codas. It is relevant to point out, however, that the basis of this dichotomic approach is the orthography-phonology correspondence – or lack of it – and that only the postvocalic graphemes and phonemes are taken into account. Thus, the terms 'conservative' and 'radical' (see Zamora and Guitart 1988 on the use of the latter) should be used with care as they do not do justice to a very complex situation.

'Conservative' has been applied to Spanish varieties with a pronunciation that remains relatively close to the spelling and which, thanks to what Rosenblat (1963: 31) quite aptly called 'letter fetishism', have greater prestige among native and non-native speakers.<sup>1</sup> Zamora and Guitart did

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, this attitude is not confined to Spanish speakers: a clear example of this graphemic 'fetishism' is the English adverb *often* with its two current pronunciations [ofn] and [oftn]. The first one represents the natural evolution of the word, whereas the second shows the insertion of /t/ inspired by the spelling. Jespersen points out that "H[art] 1569 and G[ill] 1621 still pronounce /t/ in *often*, but it seems to have been always mute in the 18th and 19th c[enturies] until quite recently pedants have tried to re-introduce it on account of the spelling" (1965: 225; our emphasis). However, English speakers seem to shy away from the artificiality of these apparent triumphs of the orthography: in his *Longman Pronouncing Dictionary*, J.C. Wells (1990) reports that in answer to a postal