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RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Axiological aspects of teaching Spanish in the Soviet Union

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### Abstract

**Objectives.** The paper analyzes core axiological aspects of Spanish teaching in higher educational institutions of the Soviet Union from the 1930s to the early 1980s based on various sources including textbooks, tutorials, etc.

**Methods.** The study is based on textual-analytic, historical-comparative, and structural methods.

**Results.** Scientific-pedagogical and sociological aspects of the subject are distinguished. The former are limited to the internal developmental logic of Spanish studies, while the latter refers to external circumstances, including ideological factors. The literature review shows that Spanish teaching in the USSR progressed topically from simple manuals aimed at consolidating linguistic basics to a more rigorous pedagogical development of Spanish language studies (grammar, phonetics, vocabulary, etc.) The authors identify two significant periods in the development of Soviet Spanish studies, with the first phase extending from the 1930s to the early 1960s, and the second—from the 1960s to the early 1980s.

**Conclusions.** The analysis showed that the formation and development of each period is associated with such events as the Spanish Civil War and the victory of the Cuban Revolution, which are not directly related to Spanish teaching. The first event coincided with the beginning of systematic Spanish teaching at the USSR universities, while the second redirected this process from Castilian to Latin American Spanish. However, the analysis of textbook and tutorial materials convincingly demonstrates that this process of redirection, which mainly concerns the selection of textual materials, remains incomplete. This supports a conclusion concerning the limited impact of ideology on the internal logic of the Spanish studies development in the USSR.

**Keywords:** Spanish, higher education, methodology, ideology, teaching of foreign languages

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НАУЧНАЯ СТАТЬЯ

## Аксиологические аспекты преподавания испанского языка в СССР

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### Резюме

**Цели.** Целью статьи является анализ ведущих аксиологических аспектов преподавания испанского языка в высших учебных заведениях Советского Союза (с 1930-х до начала 1980-х гг.) на основе изучения содержания учебников, пособий и ряда других трудов.

**Методы.** В статье применяются текстологический, историко-сравнительный и структурный методы.

**Результаты.** На основе анализа указанных текстов авторы делают акцент на двух основных группах аспектов: научно-педагогических и внеаучных. Первые связаны с внутренней логикой развития испанистики как науки, вторые – со сторонними, внешними обстоятельствами, прежде всего, идеологическими. Анализ источников показывает, что тематически преподавание испанского в СССР проделало путь от простых пособий, нацеленных на закрепление основ языка, до углубленной разработки разнообразных конструктов испанского языка (грамматики, фонетики, лексики и т.д.). В хронологическом отношении дифференцированы два основных периода в развитии советской испанистики: с 1930-х до начала 1960-х гг. и с начала 1960-х до начала 1980-х гг.

**Выводы.** Анализ показал, что становление и развитие каждого из периодов связано с событиями, не имеющими к преподаванию испанского языка прямого отношения: гражданской войной в Испании и победой Кубинской революции. Следствием первого события стало начало систематического преподавания испанского в вузах СССР, а следствием второго – переориентация этого процесса с пиренейского варианта испанского на латиноамериканский. Однако содержание учебников и пособий убедительно демонстрирует, что эта переориентация не была полной и касалась преимущественно подбора текстовых материалов, что позволяет авторам прийти к выводу об ограниченности влияния идеологии на внутреннюю логику развития испанистики в СССР.

**Ключевые слова:** испанский язык, высшее образование, методология, идеология, преподавание иностранных языков

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### INTRODUCTION

The methods, approaches, and technologies of foreign language teaching have been always developed in tight integration with a number of other sciences, such as philosophy, pedagogics, psychology, psycholinguistics, and communication theory, whose data has been and is being productively implemented to assess the effectiveness and validity

of the research. Today, the task of finding the most effective and rational ways of forming the foreign-language communicative competence of students remains still relevant [1].

Of the major European languages, Spanish came to Russia later than e.g., German, French, its systematic teaching and study beginning only during the twentieth century. In many respects, this can be attributed to the long period during which close relations between

Russia and Spain were absent<sup>1</sup>. This fact presents researchers with an interesting opportunity to analyze the formation and development of the teaching strategy for a particular subject over a limited period of time, as well as to evaluate the changes to which it has been subjected.

The present paper sets out to analyze axiological aspects of teaching Spanish in the USSR; in other words, its values (research, scientific, ideological, etc.). The composition of these values and degree of their influence on the pedagogical process are considered according to the logic of a comprehensive analysis of Spanish language textbooks for higher education institutions. Since school education does not rely directly on scientific achievements, it is considered to be beyond the scope of the study. Moreover, since we do not take a strictly historiographical approach, a comprehensive overview of works related to the topic also falls outside the scope of this study. Readers interested in such a historiographical overview are recommended to consult the already published reviews [3, 4].

The chronological framework of the study covers the period from the 1930s to the early 1980s, the lower boundary being the beginning of teaching Spanish in higher educational institutions (HEIs) of the USSR and consequent appearance of the first university textbooks. The upper boundary is the beginning of *Perestroika*, whose impact on the educational process may require a separate study.

While separate works dealing with the analysis of related topics (history of relations between Russia and Spain, study of Spanish language and literature, etc.) are available, a comprehensive study of teaching Spanish in Soviet HEIs is yet to be published, hence the relevance of the present paper.

The evolution of Spanish studies can be summarized briefly as follows. At the early stage of Spanish studies formation, the grammar-translation method based mainly on the performance of lexical-grammatical exercises and reading, along with textual analysis, has prevailed in the teaching methodologies used [5]. Later, a tendency towards the prevalence of the conscious-practical method implying the priority given to the practical aspect of language proficiency, along with a systematic perception of grammar, can be identified<sup>2</sup>. This methodological transition can be seen as a consequence of the general development of Soviet pedagogics and the concomitant improvement of foreign language teaching methods.

<sup>1</sup> The main reason for this lies not so much in the geographical remoteness of the countries from each other as the fact that Spain and Russia became leading subjects of European politics at different times, in the 16th and 18th centuries, respectively. In other words, by the time Russia entered the Pan-European arena, Spain had already left it. In any case, regular diplomatic relations between the two countries were not established until the first half of the 18th century [2].

## PRINCIPAL TRENDS OF TEACHING SPANISH IN THE USSR

In the Soviet Union higher education system, the Spanish language was first taught during the 1930s. This was not accidental since it was during this period that Spain and the USSR experienced a hitherto unprecedented convergence of destinies. During the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), the Soviet Union actively supported the pro-Communist forces. That was a time of intense exchange between the two countries, not only in the military sphere, but also in cultural and social contexts. A number of Soviet writers, such as Ilya Ehrenburg and Mikhail Koltsov, visited Spain during those years [6]. In 1940, the well-known collection “Culture of Spain” was published in the USSR, being the first publication of its kind in Russian to include articles on various aspects of Spanish studies [7].

Due to the large number of Soviet professionals traveling to Spain during this period, the question of their appropriate linguistic training became paramount. In these circumstances, textbooks and manuals aiming at the most rapid mastery of the basics of the language started to appear. Textbooks for 1st–3rd year students of HEIs were among the first to be published in 1933 [8, 9]. Here we may mention the “Spanish Textbook: Elementary Course” published in 1937. According to its author, this publication was aimed at “the ability to read simple socio-political texts and to express one’s thoughts simply but competently [10].” Such textbooks were notable not only for their concise grammatical material but also for the uniformity of the ideological agenda presented; they were largely based on texts and lexical items of the communist and anti-capitalist orientation including texts about Marx, Stalin, the conquest of Mexico by Cortés, etc. Since such an orientation was logical in the context of the civil war and associated ideological confrontation, its relevance to that time is not in question. However, the main methodological limitations of these manuals recognized to consist in a bias towards lexico-grammatical aspects of the language to the prejudice of phonetic features; in other words, the striking prevalence of the grammar–translation method over other important pedagogical principles.

In discussing early stages of Spanish teaching in this country, we should mention “Essays on the History of the Languages of Spain” by V.F. Shishmarev, being the first of its kind like the collection of essays on culture mentioned above. Even though this was not a Spanish textbook, it was actively used by Hispanists as a manual for studying the history of Iberian languages until other relevant works appeared. The author provides a panoramic view of the development of Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, Galician, and Basque languages in

a broad historical context. Certainly, this work is not free from shortcomings; in particular, it contains inaccuracies and apparent errors related to the Spanish language of Latin America. For example, the author translates the word *huaca* as “tomb” and *alpaca* as “mountain goat” [11], which lexical items have been assimilated by Spanish from Quechua, the official language of the Inca Empire and the most widely spoken indigenous language in both Americas. However, such inadequacies do not significantly diminish the value of the work, especially when making allowance for the lack of materials on the languages of Latin America (which remains partly true today).

The defeat of pro-Communist forces in the Spanish Civil War had a certain impact on teaching Spanish in the USSR and on Spanish studies in general. Nevertheless, these areas continued to develop (as a major world power claiming primacy in science, the USSR could not remain ignorant of one of the world’s most widely spoken languages). In addition to the work of Shishmarev, it is worth noting the “Spanish Language Courses for Higher Education Institutions” by O.K. Vasil’eva-Shvede [12], which continued the line of manuals mentioned above, as well as the first normative grammar of Spanish written by the author in co-authorship with Georgy Stepanov [13]. However, with the 1939 victory of Franco’s Nationalists, a powerful ideological impetus, which might otherwise have contributed to the further activation of Soviet Spanish studies, was lost.

The Cuban Revolution (1953–1959) served as a new development vector, which, moreover, partly helped to redirect the focus of Spanish teaching from Castilian (Iberian) to the Latin American variants. However, the correlation of these language versions remains one of the most important and ambiguous issues in national teaching practice.

From that time up to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, linguistic connections were maintained primarily through the Soviet Union’s diplomatic relationships with various Latin American countries (Soviet-Spanish diplomatic relations were interrupted for many years, only being resumed in 1977 [14]). This refers not only to Cuba but also to other countries having strong socialist and communist ideology (e.g., Ecuador, Peru, and Mexico). Since these processes undoubtedly had an influence on Spanish teaching in the USSR, it is necessary to assess and characterize this impact in more detail.

When analyzing the educational literature of this period, two major trends should be noted. The first is the absence of a rapid response to Cuban Revolution taking the form of new published materials, as did occur in the case of the Spanish Civil War. The second is the gradual increase in both the quantity and quality of works related

to Spanish teaching published during the 1960s and 1970s.

The first can be explained in terms of the USSR not being as actively involved in the Cuban Revolution as it had been in the Spanish Civil War. Consequently, its position may be characterized as “wait-and-see,” with the result that no hasty response to the events took the form of innovations in Spanish teaching. It was only when the victory of the Cuban Revolution became a *fait accompli* that Cuba and Latin America in general would become a subject of interest to textbook authors (this interest can be approximately dated to the early 1960s).

The second trend deserves special attention. Its most obvious reason is precisely the sharp increase in contacts with the Spanish-speaking world (the comparable factor occurred in the 1930s turned out to be short-lived, virtually disappearing with the end of the Spanish Civil War). In turn, the increase in contacts created a demand for Spanish-speaking professionals who would not just know the language, but also be able to master the entire complex of foreign language communicative competence. The consequence of this has been an increase in the number of HEIs offering the relevant training. This in turn resulted in an increase in the number of textbooks and manuals on the Spanish language, as well as in the formation of several significant academic centers offering both practical (teaching) and methodological (development of textbooks and manuals) training, as well as hosting theoretical research in the field of Spanish studies. Among these are the Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev schools of Spanish studies.

A special place among the works of this period is occupied by Stepanov’s monograph ‘Spanish Language in Latin America’ [15] based on the author’s doctoral thesis (the same researcher also subsequently published a monograph ‘On the Problem of Linguistic Variation. Spanish Language in Spain and America’ [16], whose content largely overlaps with the work considered here). In the Russophone literature, this represents the first experience of creating such a compendium of the linguistic picture of Latin America. As Stepanov himself notes, his work was inspired by the need to study the American version of Spanish due to expanding contacts with this region [16]. While it would not have been possible to consider all versions of Spanish in Latin America equally in one monograph, this work established a clear direction for further research. The main result of the work is the author’s compelling evidence for the need to study the American Spanish in detail, not as a deviation from the norm (i.e., the Castilian version), but as an independent linguistic unit. Unfortunately, a detailed study of Latin American Spanish in the USSR has not been widely



and systematically developed, despite the occasional publication of individual works [17–19]. In addition, this vector has only partially been implemented in the Spanish teaching practice, as will be described further in more detail.

This later period is characterized by an increase in the number of textbooks presenting general Spanish curricula of various orientations, including textbooks published for both linguistic and non-linguistic institutions. This indicates the growing popularity of Spanish as an object of study among students in various fields despite other major European languages like French and German continuing to be more prevalent.

In terms of their content and methodology, the considered works are characterized by a certain diversity. One of the first textbooks of this period for language universities is the ‘Textbook of Spanish Language’ by N.A. Velikopolskaya and V.I. Rodríguez–Danilevskaya published in 1963 [20]. In terms of methodology, this work is based on the principle of parallel mastering phonetic and lexico-grammatical skills. While the selection of lexical and textual material is quite standard, since it reflects everyday themes (“Home,” “My Family,” “At the Institute,” etc.) and the contemporaneous realities of social life (“In the Lenin Museum,” “November 7”), the authors also demonstrate a strong bias towards the literature of the Spanish Golden Age (fragments from the works by Lope de Vega and Francisco Gómez de Quevedo y Villegas) and realistic prose (Pedro Antonio de Alarcón and José Herrera Petere). The textbook also contains several texts on Argentinian and Uruguayan topics, which is rather unusual for Soviet textbooks due to the ideological difference between USSR and Argentina [21].

By way of comparison, we can analyze the textbooks for students attending non-linguistic universities. This includes, for example, the ‘Spanish Textbook’ for the first year of non-linguistic faculties of universities [22]. While it is methodologically similar to the previous one, the subject matter of many of the included texts (“Medical Equipment,” “Vitamins,” etc.) suggests that the course is addressed, among others, to physicians. This seems quite significant, since Spanish textbooks with such a narrow focus are rare in Russia.

The Spanish textbook written by Yu.A. Smychkovskaya is addressed to the HEI students of non-linguistic specialties. Featuring fairly standard content, it presents grammatical topics with increasing complexity and building in parallel lexical skills on the basis of texts of various topics: the first one covering domestic themes followed by some ideologically expressed texts about Latin America, Lenin, and the Cuban figure José Martí [23].

Discussing the increase in the number of textbooks and manuals, it is worth noting the presence of not only

general Spanish language courses, but also a variety of specialized publications covering specific aspects of Spanish studies, such as lexicology, history of language, theoretical grammar, etc. Some of these special works are designed not only for future Hispanists but also to include a wider range of readers. An example is ‘Spanish Language. Historical and Linguistic Essay’, a brief training manual authored by S.P. Mamontov [24]. To some extent, the presence of such works is an indicator of widespread interest in Spanish language.

During this period, a fair amount of attention is paid to the development of grammatical understanding. Moreover, this applies not only to general courses of practical and theoretical grammar, but also such aspects as grammatical stylistics and situational speech grammar, thus indicating a certain level of research depth. Each of these aspects will be considered in more detail.

The acknowledged leading university textbook on theoretical Spanish grammar written by Vasil’eva-Shvede and Stepanov [25] focuses on morphology and syntax. The authors present the grammatical features of all parts of speech in the context of contemporaneous innovations, including the extensive use of foreign material, in the presentation of theoretical grammar. Although in this case, the analysis is based mainly on authentic Spanish material, this raises few questions concerning the difference between the Castilian and the Latin American version, since in grammatical terms, this is fairly insignificant (this, however, is not the case with lexis and phonetics). The most noticeable differences (e.g., in the use of personal pronouns) are marked by the authors’ note.

An example of a more practical grammar course is the ‘Spanish Language Handbook’ written by S.I. Kanonich, in two volumes [26, 27]. It is obviously aimed at students already having a basic knowledge of Spanish grammar, since the first lessons include the analysis of past tenses. There is also a lexical component presented by texts on various topics. The first volume mainly consists of texts on everyday life topics, while the second contains a considerable amount of popular science and linguistic materials, such as “Louis Pasteur” or “Cuba.”

The textbook ‘Situational Speech Grammar of the Spanish Language’, also written by Kanonich [28], representing the first work on this subject published in Russian, is aimed at advanced Spanish learners. Essentially, the work examines the stylistics of the language in terms of functional grammar. Moreover, situational speech grammar is considered by the author as a part of linguistic and cultural studies, being a necessary component of understanding social spheres of communication, without which it would be impossible to fully master the cultural component of foreign language communicative competence.

To a certain extent, Kanonich's works are complemented by the textbook on grammatical stylistics of Spanish language written by N.M. Firsova. The author focuses on the functional approach to language learning [29], i.e., its learning in the context of its subsequent practical application. Despite stylistic functions of grammar being less distinct than lexical functions, Firsova rightly draws attention to them, especially in the view of insufficient knowledge concerning these aspects of linguistic competence. Mastering stylistic functions of grammar features is of undeniable importance for future linguistic professionals since it allows them to achieve a high level of proficiency. Authentic Latin American materials, mostly of Cuban and Ecuadorian origin, are used to support the analysis.

Of great interest is the textbook on prepositions written by M.N. Deev, this being a traditionally difficult grammar topic [30]. Practically all Spanish prepositions are explained in sequence along with examples.

The important subject of the history of the Spanish language is covered in the textbook 'Historia de la Lengua Española' written by E.V. Litvinenko [31], which has successfully passed through several editions. This now classic work analyzes the formation and development of the Spanish language according to a historical perspective, from Vulgar Latin to the present state. However, its focus is firmly on the Castilian version, with practically no information on Latin American versions.

The specialized works addressed to students of Hispanic Studies can be analyzed on the basis of their subject matter and thematic orientation. In addition to the above-mentioned lexicology, language history, and grammar, reference should be also made to phonetics and the theory and practice of translation.

The increasing number of textbooks on Spanish phonetics [32–35] confirms the relevance of this topic for teaching practice. It is significant that these textbooks have been published consecutively at all three academic centers of Spanish studies mentioned above, thus demonstrating the demand for the subject and the intensity of its scientific development. In terms of methodology, these works are based on a theoretical approach, with much attention paid to analyzing and describing the organs of articulation, their position in pronouncing certain sounds, etc.

The material presented in the textbooks reflects the relevance of such problems as the orthoepic norm. In general, the authors solve it in favor of the Castilian version, citing the following considerations as arguments: the impossibility of defining a "Latin American" pronunciation norm [34]; the possibility of Latin American versions seeming ridiculous in Spain [35]. At the same time, some authors do include

material on the phonetic features of Latin American Spanish [36]. This results in the paradoxical situation: despite Soviet Hispanists being mainly in contact with Latin American colleagues, they were taught the phonetic norms of the Castilian version in the first place.

It should be acknowledged that the Soviet school of Spanish studies has found itself in a difficult position in this respect; an entirely rational and satisfactory solution has yet to be found. There is no denying the above argument that no "Latin American" pronunciation norm exists as an objective reality. Although the corresponding term continues to be used in scientific literature and teaching practices, not only in Russia, it should be regarded as a conditional construct, being convenient in use, but only approximating reality. In turn, the linguistic reality Hispanists and all Spanish learners are confronted with is the variety of national versions of Latin American countries, which can differ from each other significantly.

Conversely, the phonetic norm of "classical" Castilian Spanish, it is treated as an objective reality in all the textbooks under consideration. However, it should be borne in mind here that Castilian Spanish also has a high degree of dialectal variability. This is typical not only for Latin America but also for Spain itself (there are Andalusian, Catalan, Galician, and a number of other dialects). Although the prescribed literary pronunciation norm does exist, is not absolute.

Among the works devoted to translation, the 'Textbook of Interpreting from Spanish for Institutes and Faculties of Foreign Languages' by various authors [37] along with 'Difficulties in translating from Spanish to Russian' by N.D. Arutyunova [38] should be highlighted. These textbooks are intended not just for future Spanish speakers but also for students having already mastered the language at a sufficiently high level. In the introduction, Arutyunova states that her work is aimed at 2–3 semester postgraduate students.

The first textbook is intended primarily for practicing interpreting skills, while the second one is focused to a greater extent on written translation in the context of fiction and sociopolitical literature. Despite the practical bent of the textbooks (aimed at developing a stable set of essential skills for high-quality translation), they also contain a considerable amount of theoretical material. This is especially true of the textbook by Arutyunova, which contains detailed reviews of the most grammatically complex aspects of the Spanish language (phrasal verbs, emphatic constructions, special cases of pronouns, etc.), which are traditionally given little attention in general grammar courses.

The textbook of interpreting, which also covers theoretical issues, is mainly focused on classifying and analyzing difficulties that arise during the process of interpretation. Special emphasis is placed on phonetic and lexical difficulties. This textbook is based mainly on the Latin American material, especially Cuban. The topics are also typical including the industrialization of Cuba, the struggle for independence in Colombia, etc. As Arutyunova notes, the materials appearing in the textbook are taken from Spanish and Latin American literature, as well as from the Communist press of Latin American countries. This is not surprising, due to the contacts actually being maintained between the Soviet Union and various Latin American countries, as noted above; for this reason, the focus on Latin American materials for teaching future Hispanists seems rational.

### CONCLUSIONS

The review of the main textbooks, manuals, and other works having influenced the teaching process allows some conclusions to be drawn concerning axiological aspects of teaching Spanish in the USSR. These can be conveniently divided into two groups: (1) scientific and scientific-pedagogical; (2) sociological and other aspects (e.g., ideological). Although the boundary between these groups is not absolute, it can be drawn for the purposes of ensuring maximum clarity of the issue under study.

As the title of the paper implies, the scientific aspects are directly related to the development of Spanish studies as a theoretical discipline along with its teaching. This includes the methodology and thematic orientation of the studied material.

The highly diverse thematic component is characterized by a high level of scientific research. The significant contribution made by Soviet Hispanists to the

study of various aspects of the Spanish language is duly reflected in its teaching.

Among nonscientific aspects, ideological aspects certainly stand out. Although Marxism-Leninism did not influence the philological methodology of the USSR as comprehensively as some other humanitarian disciplines (for example, history), the general ideological orientation of the state also strongly influenced the development of Spanish studies. As mentioned above, such events as the Spanish Civil War, the subsequent defeat of pro-Communist forces, as well as, conversely, the victory of the Cuban Revolution, had a direct impact on Spanish studies. In retrospect, these events have become clear markers reflecting the most important stages in the history of Soviet Spanish studies: the beginning of systematic study and teaching of Spanish language, as well as the redirection of this process from Castilian to reflect Latin American political and linguistic realities. However, this redirection process was not completed, with the Latin American component lacking proper acknowledgement in all the developed materials. Here we can clearly distinguish the internal logic of the theoretical development from the external ideological influences.

In conclusion, it has been demonstrated that Spanish teaching in the USSR can serve as an interesting example of combining internal and external influences of a different nature, which in varying degrees, directly or indirectly, affect the development of an academic subject.

### Authors' contributions

**E.V. Novoselova**—literature review, writing the text of the article.

**N.I. Chernova**—research concept, generalization of the study results.

**N.V. Katakova**—formulation of the conclusions, interpretation of the study results.

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