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Ramón y Cajal on Castilian as a language for expressing scientific concepts

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Abstract

This vignette presents, in English translation, an exchange of letters dated 1926 between the Spanish-American scholar Mariano Poncela y Santiuste and the father of modern neuroscience and 1906 Nobel laureate, Santiago Ramón y Cajal, on the use of Castilian Spanish as a language vehicle for the expression of science concepts, and its advantages over other modern European languages. Cajal's brief note may offer an insight into the workings of his mind in relation to externalizing his ideas, as evidenced in the richness of his published biomedical and literary works.

Keywords

Castellano, History of Neuroscience, Mariano Poncela y Santiuste (1875-1970), Santiago Ramón y Cajal (1852-1934), Scientific Writing

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The presented exchange of correspondence documents a personal view of Santiago Ramón Cajal (1852–1934), the neuroscientist *par excellence*, on the use of various European languages as vehicles in scientific writing. Testaments like these are valuable for a deeper understanding of Cajal's own thought [5].

English may well be today's international language of science, but it was not always so. Centuries ago, the Spanish humanist Antonio de Nebrija (1444–1522) called *castellano* (Castilian Spanish) "the companion language of the Empire" (*la lengua compañera del Imperio*) and, during the reign of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1500–1558), it was the most widely used vehicle of expression in Western Europe for the scientific bibliography [4].

The letter in question concerns a response that was solicited in May 1926 by Mariano Poncela y Santiuste (1875–1970), at the time a resident of Tampa, Hillsborough County, Florida [1]. A native of Santander, Spain, Poncela had earned his Doctorate of Philosophy and Letters in 1900 from the University of La Habana [7], and a Gold Medal in 1914 from the Habana Circle of Lawyers for a monograph on the work, ideas and influence of his compatriot, the scholar and literary critic Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo (1856-1912) [3, 9].

In the course of editing the *Diccionario Histórico America*no, Poncela asked don Santiago for a personal opinion on the suitability of Spanish as a language for expressing scientific ideas. Besides their common roots in Spain, the two gentlemen also shared a Cuban commonality: Poncela had pursued university studies there, and Cajal had served as captain of the Spanish Medical Corps in the Cuban War [6].

The two letters, kept in the National Library of Spain, resurfaced 40 years after they were written [8], and reprinted even later [4]. Cajal's handwritten note (Fig. 1) was reproduced in 1984, on the occasion of the fiftieth memorial of his death, in a limited facsimile edition of 200 pieces in 34×45 cm folio [2].

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Figure 1. Cajal's handwritten note addressed to Mariano Poncela. Scanned from copy no. 25 of the limited edition facsimile [2]. (Author's private collection).

Here is an English translation of the two letters:

Tampa, Florida (United States), 10 May 1926 His Excellency Sir don Santiago Ramón y Cajal Madrid.

Most distinguished Sir,

Engaged over many years in the collection of materials for a General Dictionary of the Spanish Language, I take the liberty of bothering you in order to know your opinion on whether Castilian Spanish is a language that has in itself the necessary resources as a means for scientific expression, something that some deny, which matter I shall address in the Introduction to the aforementioned work.

As in that work I intend to cite both ancient and modern examples, and examples of scientific studies in particular, I would be grateful if you indicated which of your writings You think are most useful to this end.

Asking You to forgive such nuisance, I am delighted to lend myself at your command, your

attentive faithful servant, Who shakes your hand, M. Poncela Address: Dr. M. Poncela 3503, 12th Street Tampa, Florida (United States)

The 74-year-old Cajal replied:

11.6.1926 Dr. M. Poncela My dearest Sir,

My opinion on the aptitude of the Spanish language for expressing any scientific concept is frankly affirmative. Not only owing to its wealth of expressions being superior to any other language (English and German notwithstanding), but since, by general agreement, the technical and scientific terms derived from Greek and Latin are common to all languages.

I can state that I have published more than 40 volumes of scientific works in Spanish, and I never encountered any difficulty in expressing my thoughts. By contrast, in transforming them into French or German, they have lost much of their vigour and precision, and translators often resort to the use of aggravating periphrases.

In sum, and generally speaking, any modern language can be a good vehicle for science, especially languages such as French, Italian, English, and German, which have a great literary tradition. Nevertheless, Spanish is ahead of them all, provided, of course, that one has a good command of it.

From Your faithful servant who busses your hand, R. [Ramón]

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