Spanish-Speaking Latinos in London

Introduction

It’s obvious and it has even become noticeable in specific areas of London where...just walking down the street you hear music in Spanish, conversations in Spanish in specific areas of London. I think this space has grown in recent years because of, I don’t know, sudden economic or political necessities in those countries.

Es evidente y incluso se está marcando en unas zonas específicas de Londres donde...solo pasas por la calle escuchas música en español, conversaciones en español, en áreas muy específicas de Londres. Yo creo que ese espacio ha crecido en los últimos años por cuestiones de, no sé, de las necesidades económicas de pronto o políticas de pronto en esos países. (Carlos, 12/9/2003)¹

Carlos, a Colombian man in his early 40s, is responding to a question posed about the existence of a Spanish-speaking Latino (hereafter SSL) community in London. What he says here is consistent with what I have observed since I first moved to London in autumn 1996. Whether it is riding on the bus or a tube train, or simply walking on Tottenham Court Road, I will inevitably hear Spanish spoken on at least one occasion during my journey to and from work. And, if I go to one of the ‘specific areas’ referred to by Carlos, such as The Elephant and Castle in South London, I will surely hear even more Spanish spoken. Spanish, therefore, seems to have joined an ever-lengthening list of languages spoken regularly by more than 50,000 people in London and, indeed, it likely ranks ahead of more established languages such as Cantonese and even Greek. However, as of 2005, it is a grossly under-documented

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language: as I explain below, it barely merits a mention in the literature on multilingualism in Britain and there have been, to my knowledge, just two publications of note on SSLs.

This chapter is a modest attempt to remedy this lack of attention to SSLs in London. As I have done in previous chapters, I begin with a brief sociohistory of SSL migration to London. This done, I move to explore three distinct discourses of Spanish-speaking Latinidad (Latin-ness) in London. By ‘discourses of Spanish-speaking Latinidad in London’, I mean differentiated and perhaps even competing ways of describing, making sense of, analysing and evaluating the institutions and processes associated with being an SSL in London. The first of these discourses is the voice of the marginado, that is migrants living on the fringes of society, both socially and economically. The second discourse of Latinidad is the voice of the asimilado (assimilated), that is the migrant who intends to stay in London and does everything possible to take on local cultural norms. The third and final discourse of Latinidad is that of the educated expatriate, who lives at a midway point between the marginado and the asimilado. As I have done in the previous two chapters, I conclude by linking these stories to some of the frameworks and issues discussed in Chapters 1–3.

The history of Spanish language and SSLs in Britain and London

In publications devoted to the past and present of migration to Britain, there has been little or no information of Spanish speakers and SSLs in particular. Thus, in books on migration, such as Eades (2000) and Winder (2004), and books on multicultural Britain, such as Modood et al. (1997) and Parekh (2000), I have found no information about Spaniards or SSLs. An exception is to be found in Nick Merriman’s (1993b) edited collection, *The Peopling of London*. Here there are two short chapters on Spanish speakers, one about Spanish nationals and the other about Latin Americans. Javier Pes (1993) argues that there is a long tradition of Spaniards in London, including Catherine of Aragon, who married Prince Arthur in 1501. From the Sephardic Jews, fleeing the Spanish Inquisition after 1492, to some 4000 Basque children, who arrived in the years of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), there was for centuries a trickle of migration from Spain to Britain, primarily for political reasons. However, it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that Spaniards, mainly from Galicia, came to London in significant numbers.