
Francisco Javier Pérez. *Los jesuitas venezolanos y el lenguaje: La invención de las lenguas y la construcción de una lingüística misionera, siglos XVII y XVIII.* Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2024. Pp. 342. Paper €48.00.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars viewed Jesuit missionaries as civilizing gospel-spreaders among “primitive” communities on the edges of empire. A hundred years later, many were less interested in the diffusion of Catholicism, often choosing to approach the sons of Ignatius as scientists, ethnographers, and cartographers. Francisco Javier Pérez’s focus on the Jesuits as linguists in *Los jesuitas venezolanos y el lenguaje* follows this general shift toward the natural or social sciences. Pérez ignores processes of evangelization to describe what he calls the “scientific legacy” (13) of the Black Robes in the colonial province of New Granada. His goal is to demonstrate that Jesuit works on language influenced Enlightened thinkers and continues to guide linguistic studies in Venezuela today. Pérez’s study is a reminder that important intellectual labor took place in peripheral zones far away from the centers of power in the early modern Atlantic world.

Los jesuitas venezolanos y el lenguaje can be divided into two general parts. In the first part, Pérez outlines the origins of a general colonial tradition of linguistic studies in New Granada. He reviews early royal support for the study of language, stresses the influence of Antonio de Nebrija, and lists—with substantial commentary—a wide range of dictionaries and grammars between the 1530s and 1780s. Unlike many studies of the missionary theater across Spanish America, Pérez insists on the need to focus on both Indigenous languages and Castilian. In terms of sources, he does not

limit himself to missionary writings in Indigenous languages but branches out to other general histories with linguistic content. In so doing, he wisely stresses the need to move beyond the published record to understand that linguistic knowledge circulated in several manuscripts, many of which have been lost today. Pérez convincingly demonstrates that there was significant intellectual interest in the study of languages in colonial New Granada.

In the second part, Pérez offers case studies of seven Jesuit writers over six chapters: (1) Pierre Pellepart, (2) José Gumilla, (3) José Cassani, (4) Alonso de Neira and Juan Rivero, (5) Felipe Salvador Gilij, and (6) Lorenzo Hervás y Panduro. Pérez’s detailed analysis of their writings is designed to highlight how their methods laid the groundwork for modern approaches to the study of languages and subdisciplines like historical and comparative linguistics, to name but a few. While the title of his book refers to Venezuelan Jesuits and missionary linguistics, it is important to stress that Cassani and Hervás never stepped foot in New Granada and Cassani was never a missionary. In fact, Pérez offers neither a description of Jesuit missionary strategies among Indigenous peoples nor a basic overview of the internal organization of the Jesuit province of New Granada. Instead, Pérez carefully dissects Jesuit writings—both missionary and otherwise—for linguistic content so that he can explain how early modern Jesuits contributed to the discipline of linguistics in what today is Venezuela.

In a separate appendix, Pérez follows the influence Jesuits had on the work of the German naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt. Pérez argues that scholarly emphasis on Humboldt’s contributions to the natural sciences have unfortunately overshadowed his impact on the social sciences. Not only did Humboldt write four lexicographical texts, but he also weaved “hidden dictionaries” (292) into the narrative of his trip through Venezuela. When he wrote about language, Humboldt relied heavily on missionary writings, both those by Franciscans but especially those by Jesuits like Gumilla and Gilij. As a result, Pérez stresses that Humboldt’s corpus of writing contains a wealth of information on Indigenous and Creole elements in Venezuelan Spanish today.

Pérez’s esteem for the Jesuits in his study—like when he refers to the “incomparable wisdom” of Gilij or the “unwavering intelligence” (76) of Cassani—betrays the collaborative nature of knowledge production in the early modern Atlantic world. Beyond a passing reference to a “Maipure speaker” (296) who was an informant for Humboldt, Pérez largely ignores Indigenous contributions to language studies, whether as early translators or as partners in the production of Indigenous language tools. Even if their names do not appear on colonial publications,

all studies of Indigenous languages in the Americas should begin with a recognition of the intellectual labor of Indigenous peoples. Based on decades of research on colonial go-betweens, we know that even if European missionaries failed to give the original inhabitants of the Americas credit, they relied heavily on Indigenous knowledge for their work and survival.

While *Los jesuitas venezolanos y el lenguaje* is a fascinating read, it is not designed for a general audience. Pérez provides neither an introductory overview of the colonial province of New Granada nor any maps to situate the reader geographically or linguistically. His narrative style is dense, filled with lengthy quotations, lists of linguistic content from his primary sources, and historiographical details that, in some cases, would have been better suited for the footnotes. Having said this, Pérez's book serves an immensely useful bibliographical function, thus making it an incredible reference source for those seeking to understand the study of language in colonial New Granada. Beyond this, scholars interested in the global development of linguistics as a discipline, or those researching the intellectual labor of early modern Jesuits, will benefit from Pérez's detailed work on an often-neglected region of the Spanish empire.

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