

TRANSLATING CALIFORNIA:

Official Spanish Usage in California's Constitutional Conventions and State Legislature, 1848–1894

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Pablo de la Guerra was not an ideal candidate for a conquered man. Educated, landed, and holding great prestige in his community, de la Guerra was a *Californio* who witnessed the transfer of his native land from Mexico to the United States during the Mexican American War. His previous advantages afforded him continued respect in post-1848 California. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo guaranteed United States citizenship for Mexican citizens living in the newly secured territories. While de la Guerra maintained some of his previous wealth and status, he shared conflicted views about his new “Yankee,” English-speaking identity and the feeling that came from writing in English rather than in his native Spanish. De la

* Rosina A. Lozano recently completed her PhD in History at the University of Southern California. I would like to acknowledge several individuals who made this article possible. Thank you to William Deverell for recommending that I publish this article and to George Sánchez, Félix Gutiérrez, and Mary Dudziak for providing advice, encouragement, and notes on all my work. An early version of this article was presented at the Western History Dissertation Workshop held at Yale University in May 2009. I wish to thank Richard White, Steve Aron, Louis Warren, Adam Aranson, Ryan André Brasseaux, Jay Gitlin, and especially John Mack Faragher for their detailed comments and suggestions on my work.

Guerra's description of Anglos in a December 14, 1851, letter suggested just how strange he thought his new countrymen to be:

The English (in which I have to write to you) the idiom of birds, I do not know it with such a perfection, as I have neither beak nor wings, things both I believe inherent to every Yankee, and notwithstanding that I am one of them, yet its deficiency in me I think is because I am an unwilling one.¹

This letter not only points out how de la Guerra was forced to write in English to his lawyer, Archibald Peachy, but also suggests that he would never be comfortable in his new role as a Yankee due to his imperfect English. This language deficiency would forever label him as an "unwilling" or conquered American. De la Guerra's feelings of being an outsider in the new system would be underscored as the state moved away from supporting the mother tongue of the *Californios* and in the process began seeing them as foreigners in the land of their birth.

Despite his reluctance to be a Yankee, de la Guerra became a fixture in the American period's political system. He demonstrated a certain acceptance of the new government and was selected to represent his home region of Santa Barbara in the state senate. His English skills must have improved tremendously while in this role: Just two years into the statehood period, he had already begun writing in the language of the conquerors. This gain was impressive considering he needed a translator at the 1849 California Constitutional Convention.² Perhaps due to his own language struggles and the needs of his constituents, de la Guerra was the most adamant supporter in the state senate for proper and timely translations for Spanish speakers. As his brother, Antonio de la Guerra later reminded him, without translations entire regions could not follow the law,

Aquí hemos visto varias leyes de esa legislatura pero a nada hemos hecho caso por no venir de oficio y estar en Yngles . . . no hai quien

¹ Pablo de la Guerra to Archibald Cary Peachy, 14 December 1851, box 9 fol 413, Guerra Family Collection, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California (hereafter cited as GFC).

² California, *Report of the Debates in the Convention of California on the Formation of the State Constitution, in September and October, 1849* (Washington: Printed by J. T. Towers, 1850), 305.