Raisa Carazo on varieties of the second-most spoken mother tongue in the world



Spanish

Where is it spoken?

Spanish is the official language in 21 countries around the world. Spain and Mexico are probably the most recognised, and Equatorial Guinea the least. Every continent has countries in which Spanish is spoken, whether as an official language or a foreign language.

Who speaks it?

If you speak Spanish, you can speak to about 580 million people around the world. That equates to 8% of the world population. It is a useful language to learn as it is the second-most spoken mother tongue, the second-most used on social media, and the third-most used online.

When did it emerge?

Spanish has travelled a long way on its journey to being spoken by millions across the globe. It started with the Indo-European language family, a group of languages that includes most of the languages spoken in Europe and parts of Asia. The Indo-European family has many branches. Diversification allowed some branches to flourish, develop and eventually become new language families. The Romance languages constitute one of these branches, with Spanish developing from Latin.

What is it like?

As you might expect for a language spoken in 21 countries, Spanish is rich and varied. Most languages have regional nuances, but few are as diverse as Spanish. This is explained by numerous factors, and differs between Spain and Latin America. This means that, in Spanish, there are differences not only across countries and continents but also across regions.

What is Spanish like in Latin America?

Latin America is a huge continent of many nations. Therefore, there are significant differences between varieties.

As a translator and native Spanish speaker, I wasn't aware of how different Spanish can be from one place to the next until I spent six months researching linguistic differences across 10 Spanish-speaking countries.

The variety of Spanish with the highest number of speakers is Mexican Spanish. It is quite a 'conservative variety', with many archaic forms that would have been in use when the Spanish arrived in Mexico. These archaisms fell into disuse in Spain but remained a part of the language in Mexico because the language was not influenced by innovations taking place in other Spanish-speaking areas. A distinctive characteristic is how Mexican Spanish has preserved the formal second person singular *usted* ('you'). It can be heard in expressions such as *Oiga usted* ('Excuse me') and *Pase usted* ('Come on in'), which you wouldn't hear often in Spain.

However, its closeness to the United States has had an impact on the number of anglicisms that are used: some English words have been adapted into Spanish, and others have completely replaced Spanish terms. Adaptations include *computadora* ('computer'), whereas you would heare *coche* in Spain, and *applicar* (to apply for a job) for *echar una solicitud.* The English 'likes' is used for social media, rather than *me gusta*, and you hear 'post' more often than *publicación*

Other countries, such as Argentina, have had immigration from all over the world, in



Spanish in five minutes

Hola (Oh-la)	Hello
Por favor (pohr fah-VOR)	Please
Gracias (gra-SEE-ahs)	Thank you
Adiós (ah-dee-OHS)	Bye

particular from Spain and Italy. This has had a particular impact on the Spanish spoken there today. If you go to Buenos Aires, you can hear a rhyming slang called Lumfardo, which could be considered a 'Spanish Cockney'. Cockney plays with the rhythm and order of words – you would say 'apples' for 'stairs' (from 'apples and pears'). Similarly, Lumfardo's main characteristic is wordplay and the inversion of word order. So, you get *lor-ca* instead of *ca-lor* ('heat') and *chochamu* instead of *muchacho* ('young man').

Native languages are equally influential. Paraguay, for instance, is the only Spanish-speaking country where an indigenous language, Guarani, is more widely spoken than Spanish. The Guarani indigenous population accounts for about 2% of the population, yet 90% of the population speaks Guarani. This makes it one of the few bilingual nations in the world.

Does Spanish vary in Spain?

In Spain, Spanish cohabitates with four other official languages, and 40% of the population lives in areas where these languages are spoken. In Latin America, 420 indigenous languages live alongside Spanish.

Variation is not as great within Spain as Latin America. Certain changes seen in Latin America, such as the influence of American English on Mexican Spanish, are not found in Spain. Spain doesn't border as many different nations as Colombia does, and hasn't suffered colonisation to the same extent as Latin American nations. Nevertheless, differences in Spanish within Spain are not to be underestimated. For example, differences in accent between the north and the south of Spain can be very challenging, even for native speakers. The pronunciation of the combination *ce* and *ci* is an example: in the north they are pronounced /ze/ and /zi/, and in the south /se/ and /si/, as in *cena* ('dinner) and *cigarro* ('cigarrete').

What is it used for?

Spanish is spreading steadily throughout the world and positioning itself as a world language. It is present in the business world, with many leading international corporations operating in their native Spanish. It is also increasingly prominent in the arts and sciences: Spain is the third biggest book exporter in the world after the UK and the US, and only seven nations produce more films – Argentina ranks eleventh and Mexico twelfth. It is also important in the world of diplomatic relations, as one of the six official languages of the United Nations.

Is it defined as safe, endangered, moribund or extinct?

Spanish is not only safe, but expanding. 22 million people in 110 countries are currently studying Spanish. The US is expected to be the largest Spanish-speaking country in the world by 2050. Today, the UK is among the European nations with the greatest number of Spanish learners. ¶

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