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History Of The Spanish Language

By Steven Muller

Spanish is, after Mandarin Chinese and English, the third most spoken language in the world, with an estimated 400.000.000 of native speakers throughout the planet. Its origins, however, are much more reduced, both geographically and numerically.

Together with other initially European languages such as Portuguese, French or Italian, the linguistic roots of Spanish make it a Romance language. This means that Latin, or more specifically, Vulgar Latin, constitutes its most important linguistic base.

The constant contact and mutual influence of the Latin basis with other linguistic traditions and cultures has led to the formation of the different Romance languages as we know them today. In the case of Spanish, there are, for example, characteristics that come from the Iberian and Celtic traditions.

There is also a great amount of Greek vocabulary that was first adopted by Latin speakers and then brought into Spanish. Words such as "escuela" (school) or "huérfano" (orphan) all belong to this tradition. And we should not forget the seven centuries of Arab domination of the peninsula. This has left, among other things, an important legacy of lexical elements that have been incorporated into the Spanish language. A surname you probably know which exemplifies this is "Almodóvar".

Spanish is, especially in the bilingual territories of Spain, also known as castellano (Castilian), because of its origins in the region of Castilla. Castilla is situated in the north-central part of Spain, and it was once the neuralgic center of the Spanish empire that would take the Spanish language to more than twenty other countries.

The establishment of a linguistic unity of Spanish as a common language for the state of Spain was parallel to its territorial unity. This union was only possible after the Reconquest of the peninsula from the Arab settlers, at the end of the 15th century. The kingdom of Castilla, and also its linguistic variety, expanded to the practical totality of the Iberian Peninsula. After the marriage of Isabel I of Castilla and Fernando II of Aragón, the Spanish state was born, and Castilian language and culture became its most dominant identity. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, through a series of linguistic evolutions and normalizing changes, the language of the Spanish state became what is nowadays

known as Modern Spanish.

It is important to remember, however, that spoken Spanish is not identical in the different regions of the Spanish state. In fact, its pronunciation and lexical characteristics can vary to a very significant extent from one place to another. However, the maintenance of a unified, standard, version of the Spanish language and of its written form is guaranteed by the Real Academia de la Lengua Española. The Academia sets the rules to follow in order to speak and write in a way that is accepted by all the different Spanish speakers.

Steven Muller works for Babylon Idiomas, a Spanish language institute with schools in Spain [Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia, Sevilla], Argentina and Costa Rica. For more information visit

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Argentine Spanish Versus Spanish From Spain: Do They Even Speak The Same Language?

By Scott Ferree

One of the most frustrating things about learning Spanish is that, somewhere along the line, students realize that the Spanish they hear spoken by native speakers may or may not be the same Spanish that they had been taught at their university or high school.

Say, for example, it's your first time traveling in Latin America and you go into a green grocer's in Buenos Aires to ask the price of a box of strawberries that you saw in the display stand.

"¿Cuánto cuestan las fresas?" you ask, proud of your linguistic skills - the complete sentence, the verb that is properly conjugated, the Spanish 101 vocabulary that you remembered at just the right moment.

But instead of smiling and answering your question, the green grocer stares at you blankly, as if you have two horns growing out of the top of your head: "¿Eh?" It's the reaction that every foreigner learns to know and to dread.

Your problem isn't that you have a faulty memory - in Spain they would have understood you perfectly - it's just that you've stumbled across one of the many linguistic variations in Spanish. Whereas in many parts of the Spanish-speaking world "fresas" is indeed the correct word for strawberries, in Argentina they are more commonly known as "frutillas."

Frustrating? Yes. But should it be entirely unexpected? Just think about English and how many different ways the same thing can be expressed: a truck in the US is known as a lorry in Britain, and the Americans' bathroom is known by the Brits as a loo; an American eraser is known as a rubber in England, whereas a rubber in the US is . . . Needless to say, the potential for confusion, and even embarrassment, is hardly lacking, especially if you're a foreign speaker who is new to the language.

It's no different in Spanish. Languages are big, complex phenomena and the ways we express things are constantly changing. Naturally, after several hundred years of minor mutations, the Spanish

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spoken in Mexico is somewhat different from the Spanish spoken in Argentina, which in turn is different from the Spanish spoken in Spain.

But that's not to say that the native speakers from these different countries can't understand one another - because they can. The differences between their ways of speaking the language are most likely to be a source of amusement and interest than anything else, something along the lines of: "You mean you guys say `frutilla'? Really? Because here we say `fresa'."

That's one of the great things about studying abroad: that you can become aware of the things which make language a living creature - unpredictable and surprising - rather than an artifact from a textbook.

Neutral Spanish isn't spoken in any Spanish speaking country or city. Becoming aware of regional differences between the varieties of the language, as well as the things which the language has in common and which tie its 400 million speakers together, is part of the fun - and the challenge - of learning the language.

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