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R. E. Batchelor and Miguel Angel San Jose  
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## A Reference Grammar of Spanish

*A Reference Grammar of Spanish* is a comprehensive handbook on the structure of the Spanish language. Keeping technical terminology to a minimum, it provides a detailed yet clear point of reference on all the intricacies of Spanish grammar, covering word order, parts of speech, verb use, syntax, gender, number, alphabet and pronunciation. Accompanied by a wealth of carefully chosen examples, it looks at Spanish in Iberia, Mexico, Colombia and Argentina, and demonstrates the differences between these varieties. It is designed specifically with English-speaking learners in mind, and contains useful tools such as a glossary of terms, an index and a detailed examination of different registers of the language. Clearly structured and systematically organized, this volume is set to become the standard guide to the grammar of contemporary Spanish, and will be an invaluable resource for teachers and students, as well as a practical supplement to textbooks and classroom study.

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To Dr Tim McGovern of Santa Barbara, California, model teacher,  
a passionate hispanist and romance scholar, and, above all,  
a lover of humanity whose life was suddenly cut very short.

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A web resource to accompany this book, containing eleven further chapters, can be found at the following URL: [www.cambridge.org/9780521728751](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521728751)

1. Prefixes, infixes, suffixes/Prefijos, infijos, sufijos
2. Emphatic and affectionate expressions/Expresiones enfáticas y afectivas
3. Epistolary usage/Formas epistolares
4. Abbreviations/Abreviaturas
5. Forms of address/Tratamientos
6. Exclamations/Interjecciones
7. Fillers/Muletillas
8. Transition words/Conectores oracionales
9. Different frequency of usage/Diferencias en la frecuencia del uso
10. Uses of “sí” and “ya”/Usos de “sí” y “ya”
11. Misleading similarities/Falsos amigos



# Preface

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This volume is designed to provide a clear, practical and comprehensive guide to the grammar of the Spanish language. It surveys the grammatical structures, not only of Spain but also of the Americas. Any complete survey of Spanish grammar must needs attempt to cover both the language as it appears in the Iberian peninsula and the language that stretches from the Mexican border with the United States (from the Río Bravo = Río Grande in Iberian Spanish) to the southern tip of Argentina (Tierra del Fuego). In other words, it roams over vast territories in the examination and analysis of a language that mingles with, and derives a rich source of expansion from, indigenous tongues like the Quechua of the Bolivians or Peruvian Incas, or the Nahuatl of the Mexican Aztecs and Mayas of Central America, or even the Palenquero, a creole language in Colombia. However, rather than devoting unnecessarily an excess of print to the grammar of every Spanish-speaking country as though they all suggested different grammatical configurations, or simply referring to an item in an often misleading blanket fashion as “Amer.”, it was deemed wiser to concentrate on four countries – strategically placed, linguistically speaking – since these will suffice to emphasize the relative uniformity of most, if not all, of them. The four countries in question are Spain, first of all, given the history of the language; followed by Mexico (M), the most populous of Spanish-speaking countries forming part of North America; Colombia (C), a large country, four times the size of France, in the north-west of South America; and finally Argentina (A), representative of the Southern Cone.

The principal aim of the book is to be as complete and straightforward as possible, avoiding much technical terminology that risks clouding the understanding of the linguistic processes of Spanish. It provides a point of reference for any serious student or teacher who seeks information on the broad sweep of Spanish grammar and its intricate detail, and who has already covered the basic structures of the Spanish language. It hopes to provide an instrument for all those attracted by the study and mastery of Spanish grammar by supplying close and detailed guidance on the numerous linguistic elements associated with pronunciation, alphabet, register or levels of language, gender, number, syntax, parts of speech, word order, use of verbs and the varieties within each of these elements. Its ambition is to demonstrate that, although Spanish is not identical in all places, any more than English retains an easy global homogeneity, it is a possible and desirable vehicle for foreign students of the language in communicating across frontiers and establishing a meaningful dialogue with numerous peoples who have inherited a fruitful and powerful means of expression.

All grammatical features are accompanied by a wealth of natural and attested examples. These examples are often presented in the feminine form. The text avoids sexist bias and reaches out to females and males alike.

Many of the chapters start with, and/or include within them, a small text in Spanish illustrating the function and use of the grammatical features under consideration. The relevant points are highlighted in bold. The skill of one of the authors (Miguel Ángel San

José), well versed in short-story writing, comes into play here. Dr. J. Pérez Larracilla has also contributed a few pieces on Mexican Spanish.

It may be contended that some of the chapters in Part X, such as proper names or foreign and indigenous terms, do not correspond to grammatical structures, but it is considered that they would be of great usefulness in the articulation of these structures.

It should be emphasized that constant cross-referencing will help in gaining a clear and more rounded picture of all the grammatical points. A few grammatical points are developed in two different chapters, resulting in very slight overlapping. However, where this occurs, treatment of the same feature is angled differently in the separate chapters.

American English takes precedence over British English. American spelling is preferred to its English counterpart, but this should present no problem to the non-American learner. Where there could be lexical misinterpretation, both American and British terms appear side by side.

Translations are provided when the meaning may not be clear to all, but otherwise no translation appears.

The book contains a glossary (see pages 533–43) that will help in understanding any semi-technical grammatical expressions that may arise. Regular use of this glossary will assist in understanding the terms appearing in the text. It is so much easier to get to grips with the grammar of a foreign language if an insight is gained into the way that the English language functions.

The text also has a comprehensive index, designed for locating any particular point of grammar.

The book is up to date. For instance, Chapter 9 contains a section on the problems of gender now that females are working in fields once inaccessible to them. Compound nouns, once unusual in Spanish, are springing up like mushrooms, and the text pays serious attention to them.

Register differences are not ignored. Regular attention is paid to differences in colloquial or spoken language, as opposed to the written word, and a simple system of R1, R2, R3 is set up, designating colloquial, standard and elevated or literary language respectively. It should be borne in mind that this grammar does not simply offer a presentation of the standard language but, much more, attempts to examine the state of the Spanish language – quite a different preoccupation. In other words, we are not merely concerned with the perfect grammatical accuracy promoted by the purists, but also with varieties of register that any serious student will encounter at every turn. Where there are colloquial constructions unacceptable to some, this is clearly indicated by the R1 assignation.

The extent of the present volume has meant that eleven small chapters now appear online ([www.cambridge.org/9780521728751](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521728751)): Prefixes, infixes, suffixes; Emphatic and affectionate expressions; Epistolary usage; Abbreviations; Forms of address; Exclamations; Fillers; Transition words; Different frequency of usage; Uses of “sí” and “ya”; Misleading similarities.

Grammatical accuracy in Spanish will provide an entry into a splendid and admirable culture and civilization, the study of which will lead to an enrichment and flowering of one’s personality. It is the hope and expectation of the authors that a firm and fluent command of Spanish, and its grammar, will form part of a felicitous and fertile relationship between the worlds of English- and Spanish-speakers.

# Acknowledgments

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A volume of this dimension would have remained severely impoverished but for the most generous willingness of the following friends and colleagues to offer and confirm information on the Spanish language as it appears in Spain, the Canary Islands and Spanish America:

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To be included in this list is Dr. Viola Miglio of Santa Barbara, California, who was kind enough to bring her most enviable skills to a final reading of the text before the printing stage.

An incalculable debt must be expressed to our copy-editor, Alison Thomas, who has combined a fine grasp of the intricacies of the Spanish language with a strong sense of consistency of presentation. The present work is all the more polished for her invaluable contribution.

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# Abbreviations

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<b>m</b>	masculine
<b>f</b>	feminine
<b>pl</b>	plural
<b>s</b>	singular
<b>A</b>	Argentina
<b>ADL</b>	Academia de la lengua (Academy of Language)
<b>C</b>	Colombia
<b>M</b>	Mexico
<b>RAE</b>	Real Academia Española (Royal Spanish Academy)

# Introduction to the Spanish language

After English, Spanish is the most widely spoken language in the world.<sup>1</sup> Recent calculations suggest that at least 400 million people use it as their mother tongue. Its study is therefore most worthy of our attention. As with English, it is characterized by a striking energy and inventiveness, and a high capacity for survival; for all its diffuseness, it exhibits a remarkable integrity, notably in its grammatical coherence. The Spanish language arose from the dissemination of Vulgar Latin, a spoken form of various dialects of the classical Latin of a Caesar, a Virgil or an Ovid, to be transformed into the most dynamic of the Romance languages, superseding even French. Alongside Dante’s *Commedia dell’Arte*, Camões’ *The Lusiads*, Rabelais’ *Gargantua*, and the writings of the Romanian Alecsandric, the vigor and imagination of the Spanish vernacular were expressed in Cervantes’ *Don Quijote*, which some feel created a paradigm for the language. Indeed, many Spanish-speakers, not just from Spain, refer to Spanish as “la lengua de Cervantes.”

The first recognizable piece of writing in Spanish appeared in the year 800 under the title *Los Cartularios de Valpuesta*. Furthermore, this fragment of Spanish is the first of any kind in a Romance language and predates the *Serment de Strasbourg*, written in Old French in the year 842. Continuing in this vein of earliest texts, the first European grammar of a modern language is that of Spanish, written by Elio Antonio de Nebrija in 1492, a date which coincides miraculously with Christopher Columbus’ first sight of the Americas, the fall of Granada, and the improvident expulsion of the most resourceful and enterprising Jews and Muslims.

Spanish is one of a group of languages which, derived in all essentials from Latin, are called Romance or Neo-Latin languages. These languages include Italian, Romanian, Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan and French. One could, of course, include varieties like Occitan and Romansch, Corsican and Sardinian (both Italian dialects), and Galician, related more to Portuguese than to Castilian Spanish. (Some might categorize Catalan as a dialect – a theory that cannot be sustained, since it is spoken by about 12 million people,

<sup>1</sup> Spanish (or varieties of Spanish) is the major and therefore official language, in the following countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Equatorial Guinea, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Spain, Uruguay and Venezuela. It is spoken as a mother tongue by between 25 and 30 million inhabitants of the USA, particularly in the Southwest and California. (For self-evident reasons, statistics here are notoriously difficult to assess, although the numbers grow constantly.) There does exist some residual Spanish in the Philippines – once a Spanish colony, and then an American colony, but an independent country from 1946 – where English and Pilipino, which is the standardized version of Tagalog, seem to have engulfed it (all three are official languages). Interestingly and understandably enough, many Filipinos, notwithstanding the use of their newly acquired language of English, still manifest their links to Spanish colonial times with their family names.

It should be added that the present authors can vouchsafe, through personal experience, the ease of communication between a Spanish speaker from Spain and an educated speaker from all the other countries cited above.

from Andorra to Valencia.) Each of these languages and dialects reflects the final development of Vulgar Latin as spoken in different areas of the Roman Empire. In each case, these tongues (as opposed to the literary or classical Latin) were spoken by Roman administrators, soldiers, colonists and traders.

At this early stage, one must question parenthetically the striking absence of Arabic influence on the Spanish language (see Section 78.3 for the lexical aspect). Apart from a legacy of some one thousand words, Arabic exerted almost no influence on the grammatical structures of the language of Castile, and the explanation is simple. The permanent enmity that provoked a deep rift between Christianity and Islam (the former doubtless shouldering most of the blame) meant that any meaningful linguistic intercourse that could have taken place between the two communities was rigorously shunned by the Christian ecclesiastical authorities, for all the attractive cultural hegemony wielded by Islam between the initial invasion of Spain in 711 and the fall of Granada in 1492.

With respect to Spanish as a modified form of Latin, the lesson is clear and unequivocal. A type of expression finally considered faulty or incorrect in Latin generated a new standard, culturally exciting and linguistically exalting, which resolved itself into modern Spanish. The tension between the spoken and written word, in the aftermath of Rome's decline, worked itself out in the domination of the former over the latter. What is considered today a solecism or linguistic incongruity could be conceived as the language model for tomorrow. As an illustration, the colloquial, and even journalistic, *las miles* de personas, may one day replace *los miles* de personas, or at least achieve a linguistic parity with it. In other words, current colloquial language is often “castizo” (*pure, correct*) in the future.

Grammarians increasingly realize that their function, even responsibility, in the scrutiny and analysis of language consists less in prescribing and preserving norms – and in the case of the Spanish language, arbitrarily imposing the Castilian variety on Andalusia, the Canary Islands and all Spanish America – than in describing the varieties of Spanish, since all are perfectly valid and admissible. The Argentinian “vos” (see Chapter 56 on personal pronouns, and a further comment below) may not be common currency in Spain, any more than the Iberian “tú” form dominates in large parts of Argentina, but this does not mean that the inhabitants of these two countries speak different languages that are mutually unintelligible. Indeed, their discourse is remarkably similar.

A shift in emphasis on the appreciation of language and its assessment in the context of the written and the spoken word has taken place in recent years. It no longer behoves commentators of language to establish patterns and models according to which all expression is judged, or to provide a code of syntax or strict linguistic analysis, so that we should all uniformly write like Shakespeare or Cervantes or Racine. A grammar is no longer required to be prescriptive but rather to put before the public what most people agree upon. Encouraging us to speak like books is manifestly not an activity to be promoted.

The most conspicuous feature in the Spanish language is that, although any endeavor to embrace the Spanish of Colombia in the same context as that of Mexico, Argentina or Spain may appear futile, its grammar is broadly consistent and regular everywhere. The Mexican grammar of a Carlos Fuentes and an Octavio Paz may exhibit discrepancies from the Argentinian grammar of an Ernesto Sábato and a Borges, or the Colombian grammar of a Gabriel García Márquez, or the Iberian grammar of Carmen Martín Gaité and Cela, but the overall patterns are not dissimilar. Admittedly, the lexical aspects of these authors contain considerable divergences, but the grammatical structures that hold together their personal choice of words, patterns of imagery, metaphorical expression, sentence structure and so on, rest on homogeneous foundations. All the Spanish-speaking

countries enjoy a common linguistic heritage, while their respective language academies function chiefly to keep relatively stable and safeguard the idiom of their expression.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, it may be argued that there is no such concept as the Spanish language of the Americas. Rather, as José G. Moreno de Alba points out in *El Español en América*, it would be more accurate to refer to the “Spanish language in America.” The preposition “en” as opposed to “de” in the title suggests all the difference. The latter preposition emphasizes one language in contradistinction to the varieties flowering throughout the continent. The various periods of colonization logically engendered different types of language in different regions of the Americas, while the basis of American Spanish corresponds to the preclassical period in Spain (1474–1525). The Spanish language in the Americas settled into more formal structures during the latter part of the sixteenth century, while many of their features originated in Andalusia, whence the conquistadores set out on their conquering mission.

A further fascinating aspect of the importation of Spanish into the Americas during the sixteenth century lies in their retention of what in Spain nowadays would be considered archaisms or are used with a different or restricted meaning. Moreno de Alba provides a whole chapter on this issue (pp. 262–70).

It is unquestionably true that if grammatical dissimilarities do arise from an investigation into the grammar models of the four countries concerned, these dissimilarities do not necessarily spring from a contrast between Spain and the Canary Islands and the Spanish American countries. Indeed, a telling illustration of this feature may be underlined by the Argentinian standard and, this we must accept, correct use of “adelante mío” (*in front of me*) and its varieties (adelante tuyo/suyo, etc.) eschewed by the speakers of the other three countries, who view it with scepticism as highly irregular and reject it without reservation. How can an adverb be juxtaposed in this way to a possessive pronoun? Nevertheless, “delante mío” (i.e. preposition and possessive pronoun) – a structure less familiar to Argentinian speakers – does creep into the colloquial language of Spain, Mexico and Colombia.

In numerous cases, however, the differences that do manifest themselves between the four countries emerge, naturally enough, from a comparison between Spain vis-à-vis her distant relatives beyond the Atlantic. In the context of phonetics, the ubiquitous “seseo” of the Americas, the Canary Islands and parts of Andalusia (see Section 2.4.4 on pronunciation) provides a most convincing case in point. Again, the Iberian second person plural subject pronoun “vosotros/as” is comprehensively ousted by the third person plural form “ustedes” (Uds.), with the accompanying change in verb form. Furthermore, one observes at least a partial absence in Spanish America of the phenomena of “laísmo,” “leísmo” and “loísmo” (see Chapter 79), such common currency in Iberian Spanish. Furthermore, the “voseo,” firmly and permanently implanted in Argentina – and sporadically appearing throughout Central America – and Colombia, with its unique verbal form (see Section 56.3.1 on pronouns), although common enough in Spain in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, disappeared without a trace by the middle of the seventeenth century.

<sup>2</sup> The academies of the Spanish language are:

Real Academia Española, Academia Argentina/Boliviana/Chilena/Colombiana/Costarricense/Cubana/Dominicana/Ecuatoriana/Filipina/Guatemalteca/Hondureña/Mexicana/Nicaragüense/Panameña/Paraguaya/Peruana/Puertorriqueña/Salvadoreña/Venezolana de la Lengua, Academia Nacional de las Letras del Uruguay, Academia Norteamericana de la Lengua Española.

The fruit of the collaboration of the above academies may be seen in such wide-ranging and challenging volumes as the *Diccionario panhispánico de dudas*.

Likewise, prepositions and conjunctions provide rich seams of contrastive investigation. Yet again, Spanish America reveals a strong tendency to use certain intransitive verbs reflexively. “Amanecerse,” “regresarse,” “huirse,” “demorarse” (*to delay*), “pararse” (*to stand up*), “recibirse” (*to graduate*) and “dilatarse” (*to delay*) are very marked illustrations of Iberian archaisms that are still vigorously used in various parts of the Americas, notably, for our purposes, in Argentina, Colombia and Mexico (see Section 78.11. on foreign and indigenous terms for a fuller development of this theme). Finally, the apocopation of the feminine form of “primera” > “primer” that once existed in Renaissance Spain (*la primer página/vez*) still occurs in active form in Argentina, Colombia and Mexico.

Notwithstanding some pronounced divergences between the grammar of Spain and the Canary Islands and that of the various countries of Latin America, most Spanish-speakers reveal a consciousness of what is correct and incorrect Spanish. For instance, there exists a consensus of opinion in the Spanish-speaking world with respect to the correctness of the simple sentence: “Vi a una chica mexicana ayer.” No one would dream of saying “mexicano” in this context, unless in jest or for some other unusual effect. Furthermore, there would be broad agreement on the use of the personal or distinctive “a” preceding “chica” (see Chapter 64 on the distinctive “a”). With respect to time, the preterit “Vi” attracted by the adverb of time “ayer” would elicit little disagreement anywhere. Of course, a Mexican speaker would probably say “chamaca” instead of “chica,” while a speaker from Spain would doubtless write “mejicana” instead of “mexicana,” a feature also most apparent, strangely enough, in Colombia, but not in Argentina. However, Iberian Spanish is slowly accommodating the “x” of Mexico – witness Manuel Seco’s note on the subject in his *Diccionario de dudas*. A Colombian speaker would not use “chica,” preferring “muchacha,” and so on. Of course, the point to stress here with reference to correctness is that, at any level of the register scale, Spanish-speakers will largely agree on the fundamental and grammatical characteristics of their language, just as the basic features of American English do not contrast conspicuously with those of British English. Differences over “chica” or “mexicana” may be construed as merely peripheral matters and certainly do not entail any serious misunderstanding of utterances. Similarly, that American English uses “have gotten” where British English resorts to “have got” does not create an abyss of incomprehension between them.

The Spanish language is not unchangeable, while the task of its presentation and study does not consist in an aberrant attempt to keep it pure and free from foreign intrusion and from constant development, but rather to signal what a cultured person would say and write. To embark on the preservation of any given language through resistance to change will cause a severe impoverishment of that language, while its highest expression in literature will decline in power if it fails to keep pace with the spoken word of the day. Fortunately, the Spanish language is avoiding any form of atrophy by adapting itself successfully to the global challenge of a multitude of influences and a constant influx of neologisms, particularly from American technology, to retain its integrity and coherence, and a comparative homogeneity which makes the present work possible, and even desirable. The Spanish of Spain, the Canary Islands and the Americas, and notably their grammar, still point to a comforting and reassuring congruity for which we are indebted to the enlightened prescience of the Duque d’Escalona, who created the Academia de la Lengua Española in 1714.