

## The Dialects of Spanish

Spanish is one of the most widely-spoken languages in the world, and there is extensive lexical variation between its numerous dialects. This book, the first of its kind, focuses uniquely on the origin, diversity, and geographic distribution of portions of the lexicon. The hundreds of words analysed – related to food, clothing, vehicles, and certain miscellaneous items – provide a representative study not only of the many etymological routes by which they have entered the Spanish language over time, but of the considerable diatopic variety which they display across the different Spanish-speaking nations and regions. Representative maps are provided to illustrate several instances of these astounding dialectal differences. This variation is also discussed in terms of its evident link to the historical developments of Spanish. Providing a compelling overview of lexical variety in the Spanish-speaking world, this book will interest anyone who wants to delve into the richness of this fascinating language.

TRAVIS D. SORENSON is an Associate Professor in the Department of Languages, Linguistics, Literatures, and Cultures, at the University of Central Arkansas. Having lived in two Latin American countries and travelled in several others, he has developed a heightened interest in, and specialized knowledge of, the type of lexical variation addressed in this book.

# The Dialects of Spanish

## *A Lexical Introduction*

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Travis D. Sorenson  
*University of Central Arkansas*



Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-83178-9 — The Dialects of Spanish  
Travis D. Sorenson  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108831789](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108831789)

DOI: 10.1017/9781108924580

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First published 2021

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

ISBN 978-1-108-83178-9 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-92718-5 Paperback

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This book is dedicated to the students who first helped  
inspire me to write it: NeAmber, Taylor, Danielle, Carrie,  
Charlene, and Kaylyn

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## Preface

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As I set out to design a college course on Spanish dialectology some years ago, I soon discovered that while there existed several adequate sources on the diversity of phonological and morphosyntactic traits, such ready-made materials on word variation were not as readily available, a somewhat ironic situation given the fact that a language's lexicon is its least stable system and thus prone to the greatest change, including in the adoption of dialectally unique vocabulary. Multiple renowned linguists, for instance, have described the *distinción* present in the pronunciation of speakers in north-central Spain vis-à-vis the *seseo* (or even *ceceo*) heard in Andalucía, the Canary Islands, and Latin America; or the tendency for syllable- and word-final /s/ aspiration and elision in the Caribbean and other coastal areas of the Americas versus general retention in the highlands; or the *zeísmo/jeísmo* of River Plate Spanish. But what about the where and why of different words for 'corn' or 'green beans' or 'mushrooms' between countries such as Spain, Mexico, Costa Rica, Venezuela, and Argentina? Similarly, sources abound containing thorough explanations of the historical background and current state, on both sides of the Atlantic, of the *tuteo/voseo* and *ustedes/vosotros* address-form dichotomies; the use of *-ito*, *-ico*, *-illo* and other diminutive suffixes; and instances of word-order flexibility such as the Caribbean *¿Qué tú quieres?* But where can one read not only of the origins but also the modern isoglosses for the Spanish equivalents of 'skirt' or 'blanket' or 'bus' in Cuba, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Colombia, and Chile? Although a considerable amount of this information can be found loosely across highly disparate sources, a systematic, one-stop reference has not existed heretofore, a gap addressed by this book.

Of course the aforementioned gap can only be partially filled by any one book, due to the obvious immensity of the Spanish language's lexical inventory. The question then becomes, what types of words should be a priority for inclusion? The logical answer is to focus on some of the most common categories of words that also display some of the greatest variation from one end of the language's geographic domain to the other. This has been done through a sixty-eight-item survey completed by respondents from the following twenty-one predominantly

Spanish-speaking territories: mainland Spain, the Canary Islands, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay.<sup>1</sup> Although at least ten surveys were gathered for each of these locales, in some cases the number was notably higher.<sup>2</sup> This was particularly important in the largest, most populous countries, such as Mexico, Spain, Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, and Argentina, in order to determine, when possible, not only inter- but intra-national variation in the lexicon. While survey responses were sought from adult speakers continuing to live in the above-mentioned areas, this was not possible in Cuba, where, despite the recent, gradual opening of US travel to the island, contacts for purposes of research continue to be elusive. In this instance, therefore, respondents were sought from among Cubans in the United States who had spent the majority of their lives in their native country before emigrating, with a focus on the most recent arrivals. Furthermore, to ensure the integrity of their answers, a response was not considered valid if not given by at least two respondents, a standard applied to all countries.

A final pair of questions to be answered is for whom this book was written and how it might be utilized. The most evident answer is that it may be used as a text by instructors of Spanish dialectology courses of the type that first inspired it, at both the undergraduate and graduate level, as well as in more general, introductory courses on Spanish linguistics. Its scope, however, is more multifaceted. It may also serve as a dictionary of common but widely varying vocabulary for students traveling abroad, or for individuals journeying internationally for commerce or tourism. It may come in handy as a glossary for journalists, translators, and those who dub or subtitle movies with the aim of achieving an appropriate level of localization when their target audience belongs to a particular dialect. Finally, it may simply be of interest to those who are naturally curious about diatopic lexical variation, be they second-language learners of Spanish or those for whom it is their native tongue. Members of this latter population are often unaware of much of the vocabulary employed in varieties beyond their own, such as the ignorance of a speaker in Spain regarding relevant terminology in Mexico and vice versa. This and

<sup>1</sup> For ease and consistency of treatment, these twenty-one different territories are called “countries” or “nations” throughout the remainder of the book. This is despite the fact that Puerto Rico is in actuality a US protectorate and that the Canary Islands, while located off the coast of West Africa some 800 miles southwest of the Iberian Peninsula, are part of Spain. As many, perhaps even a majority, of the participants did not speak English, responses were solicited by presenting a photographic image of each of the items in the survey. Since no Spanish terms were listed as options on the survey, any mention in the data analysis of informants ‘choosing’ or ‘selecting’ terms is simply an alternative way of indicating that they responded to an image by offering a word or words from their personal lexical inventories.

<sup>2</sup> The total number of respondents from all twenty-one territories was 319.

similar cases represent a pan-Hispanic twist on the famous quip, variously attributed to George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde, that “England and America are two countries separated by a common language,” though of course there is considerable variety between the different Spanish-speaking American nations themselves.