

Spanish as an International Language

Implications for Teachers
and Learners

Deborah Arteaga and Lucía Llorente

NEW PERSPECTIVES
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ON
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NEW PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

Series Editor: Professor Viv Edwards, University of Reading,
Great Britain

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Spanish as an International Language



NEW PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

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Chapter 1

Linguistics Perspectives on Spanish in a Pluricentric Society: Who Cares How They Speak? Why Variation in the Spanish Language is Important

1.1 Introduction

Currently, Spanish enjoys a position of tremendous importance among the world's languages. Indeed, with over 330,000,000 speakers, Spanish is now considered to be the second most widely spoken language in the world (Summer Institute for Linguistics (SIL) Ethnologies Survey, 1999). The perfusion of Spanish is also felt here in the United States. According to the Census of 2000, there are over 28,000,000 Spanish speakers in the United States, a 61.70% increase over the numbers of Spanish speakers reported in the 1990 census. This growth in the Spanish-speaking population in the United States affects all parts of the country, as seen in (1) below, which illustrates the increase in the number of Spanish speakers from 1990 to 2000, by region (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003: 7):

(1) Spanish Spoken at Home by the Population 5 Years and Over: 1990 and 2000.

<i>Area</i>	<i>1990</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>Percent change</i>
United States	17,345,064	28,101,052	62.0
Region			
Northeast	3,133,043	4,492,168	43.4
Midwest	1,400,651	2,623,391	87.3
South	5,815,486	9,908,653	70.4
West	6,995,884	11,076,840	58.3

How does this nationwide growth of Spanish affect those in the United States? From a cultural perspective, one cannot help but notice the nationwide dissemination of the Spanish language. All one has to do is call a financial institution or other business to be given the option of pressing 'one' for English or 'two' for Spanish. Spanish is heard daily throughout the United States, in grocery stores, doctors' offices, nail salons, movie theaters, and schools. There are several television channels and radio stations devoted exclusively to programming in Spanish, and Spanish books, magazines, and newspapers are seen in every venue in the United States where their English counterparts are sold. Schools, from grammar school to high school to higher education, have felt the impact of the growth of Spanish as well. According to García *et al.* (2007) approximately 5.5 million school age students are not native speakers of English; 80% of these students speak Spanish at home.

With respect to universities across the United States, the impact of the unprecedented growth in Spanish is reflected in the enrollment patterns in university-level language classes. According to the most recent survey of the Modern Language Association, over 823,035 students were enrolled in Spanish classes in institutions of higher education in the fall of 2006. This number far outweighs the combined enrollment of students in *all* other languages, namely 700,204 students (Furman *et al.*, 2006).¹ Indeed, in the fall of 2006, Spanish enrollment constituted 52.2% of total foreign language enrollment at the university level (Furman *et al.*, 2006: 20). The instruction of Spanish is therefore of extreme importance to many institutions of universities and community colleges across the country.

This tremendous growth in Spanish presents several challenges for high-school and university-level instruction for several reasons. One is administrative, in that it is often difficult to schedule enough sections for Spanish language classes. Another is that because of this tremendous increase, many of the introductory Spanish language classes at large institutions are not taught by tenured or tenure-track faculty members. They are instead assigned to adjuncts or Teaching Assistants, whose linguistic preparation may vary widely; there may or may not be any formal coordination of these instructors. For example, at a large public institution in the Southwest United States, of 40 sections of first-year Spanish language offered a few years ago, only one was taught by a full-time faculty member. However, regardless of the instructor in question, we believe that specialized instructor training is needed for Spanish because of its unique characteristics.

In this book we argue that the most important linguistic aspect of Spanish that instructors and students of Spanish need to understand is the

notion of **variability (regional/sociolinguistic)**. Crucial to our discussion is the adoption of a **descriptive**, not **prescriptive**, view of language.² A descriptive view of language makes no value judgment regarding regional or social variation, whereas a prescriptive view holds one variety (typically that of the upper class in a given country) as superior to others. For example, a prescriptive view of language would reject (2a) in favor of (2b), despite the fact that most native speakers say (2a), as they feel that it is gender neutral:

- (2) (a) *Everyone has their book.*
 (b) *Everyone has his book.*

A descriptive view of language would accept both (2a) and (2b), in recognition of the fact that the English language has evolved to reflect sociological change. In other words, the pronoun *their* is used to indicate *his* or *her*, whereas (2b) is considered by many to be sexist, in that it is felt to only represent males. An example in Spanish can be found in (3a) and (3b); again, those who hold a prescriptive view of language will reject (3b) even though many native speakers prefer it over (3a):

- (3) (a) *¿Qué hora es?* 'What time is it?' (literally, 'What hour is it?')
 (b) *¿Qué horas son?* 'What time is it' (literally, 'What hours are they?')

As is the case for most, if not all, divergences between prescriptive norms, as in (3a), and language as it is used, as in (3b), the former make less sense to the native speaker. This is because only one hour, 1:00 a.m. or 1:00 p.m., uses the singular verb *es* 'is.' All of the others, from 2:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. to 12:00 a.m. or 12:00 p.m., use the plural form *son* 'are'.

In the past, a prescriptive view of language was shared by most, if not all, language instructors, at both the high school and college level, as discussed in detail in Chapter 5. Vestiges of prescriptivism can still be seen today in Spanish textbooks; many language teachers continue to embrace this viewpoint. Indeed, our students, particularly our college students, are, in fact, taught to be hyperliterate. However, we believe that such a perspective does not serve our students well, because it does not give them the flexibility that they need to truly communicate with Spanish native speakers of varying nationalities and social classes. As discussed in detail in Chapter 6, we advocate instead the presentation for active knowledge of a standard variety of Spanish, by which we mean a regionally and sociolinguistically neutral variety that cuts across regional and social differences. For the purposes of the L2 classroom, we believe that the term *academic Spanish* is preferable to *standard Spanish*, as it carries with it no

negative **sociolinguistic** judgment, and it is accurate.³ We next consider regional variability (dialects) in Spanish.

1.2 **Regional Variation** of Spanish

Dialectal variation, or regional differences in speech, is a feature of natural language. All languages of the world have dialects, that is, varieties of the language that are particular to a group of speakers. Sometimes, the term **dialect** is tinted negatively, as it is associated with varieties that are considered stigmatized (as we discuss below). When we use this term throughout this book, however, we simply refer to 'any variety of a language spoken by a group of people that is characterized by systematic differences from other varieties of the same language in terms of structural or lexical features' (Bergmann *et al.*, 2007: 301). All speakers of a language speak a dialect; in fact, individual speakers speak an **idiolect** (individual variation in speech). An example of a dialect in the English spoken in the United States would be the dialect spoken in the Southern United States, compared, for example, to the one spoken in New York City.

It is not always easy to determine whether two or more language varieties are indeed distinct dialects of the same language or, rather, two separate languages. In order to make that distinction, the criterion of mutual intelligibility is often used: if the speakers of two language varieties, which show systematic differences, can understand each other, then we are in the presence of dialects of the same language. This criterion does not always work properly, as we need to consider the situation that is referred to as *dialect continuum*. In such a case, we find a large number of dialects; each of them is closely related to the next, and therefore mutually intelligible. The dialects at both ends of the continuum, however, are so different systematically that speakers cannot, in fact, understand each other. Furthermore, there are also cultural and historical differences that make the distinction between language and language variety (or dialect) difficult.

For example, in China, Cantonese, Fukien, and Mandarin are not considered to be mutually intelligible. Yet even the native speakers of these varieties (who share the same nationality) consider them dialects of the same language, because they use the same writing system, which is intelligible by all literate speakers. This view is the official position of the Chinese government, for political reasons. The Catalan language, on the other hand, which originated in Cataluña, a region in North Eastern Spain, has regional varieties, such as Valenciano (spoken in the Comunidad Valenciana) and Mallorquín (spoken in the Balearic Islands). These

varieties of Catalan evince minor yet systematic differences in the areas of the **lexicon** (vocabulary), **morphosyntax** (rules of sentence and word formation), and **phonology** (sound system). They therefore should be considered dialects of the same language. However, again for political reasons, many would argue that they are separate languages. As Posner (1996: 338) points out, in all these arguments 'myths of separate ancestry play more part than linguistic classification'.⁴

It is important to note that, even if dialects may vary, no dialect is structurally superior to another. The popular notion of dialect is that there is only one correct form of a language (generally, the one used by the speaker), but in fact the standard varies from dialect to dialect. Hazen (2001) provides an interesting example. In normal US Southern pronunciation, the words *pin* and *pen* are pronounced the same. Some other US dialects, however, make a distinction between the vowels in these words, when they appear before an /n/. The speakers of these latter dialects may consider the Southern pronunciation incorrect, when in truth it is simply different.

With respect to regional variation, however, the unique nature of Spanish in this regard cannot be overemphasized, because of its **pluricentricity**, meaning that it has several centers of prestige (e.g. Madrid, Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Caracas, Mexico City, Lima and San José), as noted by Teschner (2000).⁵ As a result, in Spanish, there is not one single 'standard' variety across dialects; each dialect has, rather, its own standard variety.⁶ The situation of Spanish is therefore in contrast to a monocentric language, like French, in which only one dialect (Parisian French) is considered to be the standard.⁷

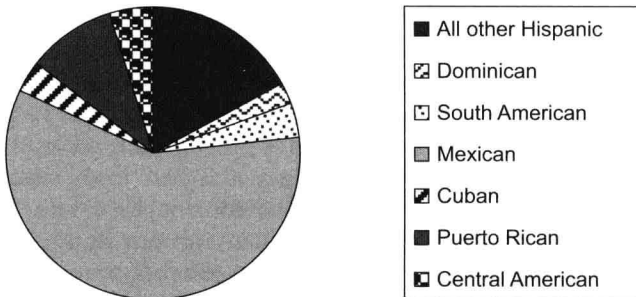
This is not to say, however, that there are no prestige dialects in Spanish. This notion is expressed by Lipski (1994: 14–15), who argues that when moving from the written to the spoken language, what is considered standard spoken Spanish allows a good deal of variety in practice, with the existence of competing prestige norms being evident. Indeed, the prestige norm is frequently based on the speech of the educated inhabitants of the capital of a given country. In larger, more complex societies where there is greater fragmentation, however, the norm may be located elsewhere. This is the case in Spain, for example, where the educated, urban speech of Old Castile and principally of the cities of Burgos and Valladolid is more likely to be adopted as a standard than that of Madrid. In the capital city, high inward migration from other parts of Spain and population mobility in general lead to the coexistence of many varieties of Spanish.

As for Latin America, Lipski notes that the speech of the Colombian capital of Bogotá is losing much of its former prestige. Similarly, in Peru,

while the prestige norm of the capital Lima is still implicit in news media and education, in reality this norm has ceased to exist and there is a fragmentation into popular varieties. Mexico City and Buenos Aires differ in that they manage to impose their prestige norm over considerable heterogeneity. Once we reach the level of non-standard spoken Spanish, however, divergences may be such that certain varieties are mutually incomprehensible.

The pluricentric nature of Spanish is highly relevant to university-level Spanish language classes in the United States, because Spanish speakers in the United States hail from a variety of Spanish-speaking regions, as seen in the diagram in (4)⁸; Guzmán (2001: 2):

(4) **Origin of Hispanics, 2000 U.S. Census Bureau,
Census 2000 Summary File 1**



Given the range of dialects spoken, Spanish students will therefore inevitably come into contact with markedly different dialects of Spanish. This exposure to different dialects may occur at school, through their instructors or fellow students, during travel or study abroad, through interactions with native speakers, or at work, through Spanish-speaking colleagues. Many Spanish students, known as *heritage speakers*, also speak Spanish at home, and therefore bring to class familiarity with a specific dialect of Spanish. Valdés (2000: 1) describes how the term *heritage speaker* is used in the United States:

Within the foreign language teaching profession in the United States, the term 'heritage speaker' is used to refer to a student of language who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or merely understands the heritage language, and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language (...). For the most part, the experiences of these heritage speakers have been