

Spanish is our language... and so is English

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The northern border of Mexico is an ideal place for an observer to watch the flow of words across the border. If he has nothing better to do, he might well spend his time worrying about the influence of English on Spanish.

The observer should note that English words are like words in any other language — they don't require a passport or visa to travel. They are transmitted by direct contact at the border and by the mass media (computer magazines too). This explains why there is probably more influence of English in Mexico City than at the border.

As a victim of English, our observer might forget that further south he is the oppressor of the speakers of Mexico's indigenous languages. Since he is not interested in these languages he thinks Mexico is a monolingual country and that the legacy of his pre-Hispanic culture is limited to an extensive collection of museum pieces and exotic place names like Tzintzunzan, Atzacapotzalco and Chichen Itza.

Our observer has not discovered the sounds of Otomi that can be heard only a few miles outside Mexico City at roadside stalls that serve tacos and quesadillas. He is even less likely to study Nahuatl, Maya or Tarasco. In his double role of oppressed and oppressor, our observer no longer wants to be one of the oppressed, but neither does he look beyond the folkloric aspects of the people he himself oppresses.

According to an article in *The Economist*, English is "the first truly universal language wider in its scope than Latin was or Arabic and Spanish are."¹ I saw that for myself in Beijing, where taxi drivers learn English over their car radios, clutching their "First Course of English."

¹ The new English empire", *The Economist*. Vol. 301, 7477-7478, December 20, 1986, pp. 127-131.

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Spanish comics and magazines with wide circulation have contributed to this language being spoken from Asturias to Patagonia.

Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi appeared on New Delhi television in 1986, speaking English to Mr. Gorbachov, who answered him in Russian. Had Gandhi used Hindi, his mother tongue, he would have stirred up political enmity in the southern Indian states that are unwilling to accept the preeminence of Hindi over their own languages.

The expansion of English owes more to economics than to linguistics. It used to be said that a language is a dialect with an army and a navy. The force behind this army and navy is, of course, economic power. "English is a world language because of Britain's power in the 19th century and America's in the 20th."²

Linguistic reasons for the spread of English are debatable. Some say it is due to structure. According to *The Economist*: "English is easy to speak badly and that is all that is required of a world language,"³ although adding that its vast vocabulary does present a formidable obstacle.

However, I fail to see how the structure of a language can make it easier to express thoughts. This fallacious belief has led some to think that Germanic languages have been responsible for the economic development of the Scandinavian countries. This ignores the fact that Romance language-speaking countries have in the past possessed

² Ibid., p.127.

³ Ibid., p.128.

both power and culture. Moreover, Japanese, the structure of which is comparable to that of Nahuatl, is presently the medium of communication of one of the world's most efficient economies.⁴

Neither the English nor the French have put the Roman alphabet to very good use. English spelling has practically destroyed the principle of alphabetic writing: one sound per letter. It has, instead, become a transcription that can only be visually, but not aurally, justified.

“English speakers do not seem overly concerned about the borrowing of words from other languages”

The difficulty of English spelling has made it necessary for the US to organize spelling competitions promoted on television. It has given rise to a fair number of dyslexics and functional illiterates and made it necessary to invent spell check programs for word processors.⁵

I do not consider the “vast vocabulary” of English to be a problem, because this feature is shared by Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Chinese and Japanese.⁶ In addition, one wonders about the criteria used to include words in English dictionaries. They may be words in use from the late Middle Ages to the present; words from England, Australia or Canada; and both standard and non-standard words.

Such linguistic wealth may be compared to hoarded riches because no one makes use of it. A highly-educated English speaker uses no more than six thousand words. Thus, the vast vocabulary of English should not be a cause for worry beyond the possible difficulty regional varieties may cause non-English speaking immigrants.⁷

⁴ Cf. Swadesh, Maurice, *El lenguaje y la vida humana*. Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1966.

⁵ See Avila, “Sólo para tus oídos: ejercicio de lectura en voz alta a propósito de una reforma de la ortografía española” (For your ears only: a reading-aloud exercise for a reform of Spanish spelling) in Lara & Garrido, eds., *Escritura y alfabetización*. Mexico, Ediciones el Ermitaño, 1986, pp. 11-38, and; Avila, “Un alfabeto fonológico práctico para el español: pros y contras” (Pros and cons of a phonological-practical alphabet for the Spanish language), Paper presented at the 1st Mauricio Swadesh Colloquium in Mexico City, *UNAM*, October 1987.

⁶ Cf. Swadesh, op. cit.

⁷ India seems to have developed a form of English that provides few obstacles to comprehension. This illustrates how one variety of English can take on a life of its own while still remaining comprehensible to speakers of standard English. “The new English empire,” op cit. p. 129. My personal experience is that the English spoken in India is easier to understand than the varieties spoken in England or Texas.

The Spanish language boasts a tradition more than ten centuries long. It is spoken by around 350 million people on three continents. Spanish is spoken from Asturias to Patagonia, as well as in New York, Florida, California, Texas and other states of the US. For this, we may thank famous authors such as Camilo José Cela, Gabriel García Márquez, Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes, Spanish comics and magazines with wide circulation, as well as international communications satellites which transmit soap operas and other popular programs in Spanish. Above all, we should thank the millions of Spanish speakers whose presence in the US makes it possible for one to visit many parts of that country without once having to speak English.

Spanish has spread throughout the world without official help or support from academies. It is strong enough to reach the smallest newborn baby through his mother's words. Even if I knew no one in Mexico, I could say that I knew everyone because of the words we share and the sounds we have heard throughout our lives. These words and sounds identify and unite us.

The words of Spanish more than suffice to discuss philosophy, science, literature, technology and business. They enable us to argue and, at times, to agree. Since the days of Alfonso the Wise, Spanish speakers have used the Roman alphabet to transcribe minstrels' songs. Spanish spelling is meant to be heard rather than seen. The relationship between sounds and letters is so simple that Spanish teachers can barely justify teaching spelling.

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Given the foregoing, one might conclude that the influence of English upon our language is limited. It is possible, however, to formulate a hypothesis that English does have an influence on the higher social classes in Mexico. This was evident in the course of three research projects which I have directed.

Assume, for example, that we are travelling through the Mexican countryside from Baja California to Yucatan, interviewing men and women from 18 to 70 of all social strata. If we record and analyze these interviews we shall find, perhaps, one foreign word or expression for every thousand Spanish words spoken by our



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informants.⁸ In addition, nearly all the foreign words we encounter are used internationally, and not all of them come from the English language.⁹ We shall also find that foreign words and expressions are encountered more often in the speech of middle and upper class subjects.¹⁰

Let us now spend a week reading every issue of *Novedades*, *El Universal*, *Excelsior*, and *La Prensa*; the four oldest newspapers in Mexico City with a daily circulation of more than 100,000 copies each. A close reading of these newspapers found—after a statistical survey—less than one foreign term for every thousand words. Once again, we found more foreign terms in *Novedades*, a paper aimed at the upper classes, than in

⁸ Cfr. R. Avila, "Las palabras de todos y las de cada uno: un análisis estadístico del español hablado en México" (The words of each and all: a statistical analysis of Spanish as spoken in Mexico), *Estudios de lingüística de España y México*, México, 1990, pp. 335-349.

⁹ Following is a sample of foreign words that occurred four or more times: kinder, basquetbol, voleyball, karate, sandwich, chance, hobby, record, rock (and roll). Foreign terms are defined as those that do not appear in the Royal Spanish Academy Dictionary of the Spanish Language, 20th ed. 1984; or other general Spanish dictionaries.

¹⁰ The frequency of foreign terms, mainly from English, in our sample was 0.06% compared to 0.04% for words from Mexican Indigenous languages.

La Prensa, a newspaper for the lower classes.¹¹ Even sports magazines, which might be expected to have more foreign terms, do not use more than four in every thousand words.¹²

For a change of scenery, suppose we go shopping in Mexico City. We will find that stores use foreign words in direct proportion to the price of their products or their clients' purchasing power.¹³ In expensive areas of the city almost 50% of the stores have non-Spanish names, while the figure is 20% in less affluent areas.¹⁴ This shows that

¹¹ See Avila & Gardner, "Extranjerismos en periódicos de la Ciudad de México" (Foreign Terms in Mexico City Newspapers), a Paper presented at the Colloquium on the Spanish Language. Commission for the Defense of the Spanish Language. Mexico City, September 1982. The percentage of foreign terms was as follows: *Novedades*, 107,561 word frequencies, 243 foreign terms (0.097%); *Excelsior*, 196,512 wd. freq., 181 foreign terms (0.092%); *El Universal*, 186,339 wd. freq., 143 foreign terms (0.077%); *La Prensa*, 78,997 wd. freq., 40 foreign terms (0.051%).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Avila & Gardner, "Extranjerismos en establecimientos de venta y servicio en la Ciudad de México" (Foreign Terms in Sales and Service Establishments in Mexico City) a Paper presented at the Colloquium on the Spanish Language, Mexico City, September 1982.

¹⁴ Ibid.



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we need not be particularly concerned with foreign terms unless we are shopping.

Linguistic borrowing, superfluous in some instances but necessary in others, is limited by nothing more than the consensus of the linguistic community that borrows terms from other languages.¹⁵ Thus, it is important to research the attitudes of English and Spanish speakers concerning this phenomenon.

English speakers do not seem overly concerned about the borrowing of words from other languages. The French, however, show a radically different attitude.¹⁶ Spanish speakers, like the French, take a more defensive position

¹⁵ See I. Guzmán Betancourt, "Extranjerismos lingüísticos: su origen y efecto en los idiomas" (Linguistic foreignisms: their origin and effect on languages), in *Voces extranjeras en el español de México*. Commission for the Defense of the Spanish Language, Col. Nuestro idioma. No. 3, 1982, p. 22.

¹⁶ Foster, Brian, *The changing English language*. Pelican, 1970, p. 76. "Throughout its history, the English language has always been hospitable to words borrowed from other languages and while it is doubtless true to say that all forms of human speech have to some extent been borrowed from outside models there are grounds for thinking that English is more than usually open to foreign influence as compared to other great languages. The French, indeed, have set up an organization whereby they hope to stem or, at all events, regulate the flux of foreign words into their vocabulary, but this would probably seem a strange idea to most English speakers, who appear to believe in a species of linguistic free trade and argue that if a term of foreign origin is useful, it should be put to work forthwith, regardless of parentage.

revealing uncertainty about the future of their language. This is illustrated by the creation of the now defunct Commission for the Defense of the Spanish Language and its successor in the Mexican Senate.¹⁷

Throughout its history, the Spanish language has had an Iberian base which has resulted in its assimilation of many Latin, Greek and Arabic words. In the Americas, Spanish profited from the addition of indigenous and foreign words. Thanks to this colorful history, Spanish speakers need not study Latin or Greek

to understand international technical terminology. Nor do they need to study Nahuatl to understand many indigenous place names.

Perhaps necessary foreign words should be adapted to our Spanish pronunciation and spelling in order to keep them within the spirit of our language. We might see English as a gateway to words of Germanic origin as well as comprising another conceptual universe.

A peoples' cultural identity is important and language is a basic component of this identity. Yet no people can survive in isolation. For that reason, it is important to learn an international language such as English. It would be wonderful if we could all be fully bilingual and avoid using foreign terms inappropriately when we speak our mother tongue.

English may be a *lingua franca*, but there is nothing to prevent us from making it our own, just as we have done with Spanish. As bilingual English and Spanish speakers, we would be able to understand and share two different visions of the world. We could discuss each other's words and provide them with new shades of meaning. We might then appreciate the expressiveness of the many varieties of non-standard English and Spanish spoken as a mother tongue on both sides of the US-Mexican border and in over twenty other countries throughout the world ✕

¹⁷ The Commission was created by President López Portillo. It was abolished by his successor, President Miguel de la Madrid.