

Spanish dialects

(The information below was kindly sent to us by FLS Spanish Interpreters and Translators)

There are 20 countries where Spanish is the main language, and several others where it is a major language. There are, therefore, many regional differences. But they are all mutually intelligible in the vast majority of situations. Cubans understand Mexicans understand Spaniards understand Argentines, but they are all instantly aware that their interlocutor is from elsewhere.

The written form is even more mutually intelligible. An educated Spanish speaker will understand 98% of what another educated person from anywhere in the world writes.

Caribbean Spanish generally means the language as spoken in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. It's spoken faster than most places, and with less emphasis placed on consonants, so they are often not even heard, especially the S, R, and D.

Castilian Spanish is a misnomer. When people say this, what they mean is "Peninsular Spanish" or "Spanish as used in Spain." Castilian is actually another name for the language we know as "Spanish," so nearly everyone in Latin America and Spain speaks Castilian.

Latin American Spanish means almost nothing. Of the 20 countries I referred to, 19 of them are in the Americas. So to say "Latin American Spanish" is almost like saying "Spanish as it is used everywhere but Spain." Argentina is part of Latin America, as are Cuba and Mexico. These three countries are amazingly different.

It is incredibly difficult to adapt the sort of Spanish to any one audience. But a well-written, not overly colloquial Spanish will be well understood by any native Spanish speaker. Of course, it is helpful for a translator-and to a lesser extent, an interpreter-to know what nationality the audience is composed of.

I'm a gringo, so my Spanish is not native. But it's a mix of Puerto Rico, Mexico, Spain, and a few other ingredients, roughly in that order. When I write, I try my best to make it easily understood by anyone.

As a side note, Mexican Spanish is the most important kind. This is because Mexico has more than double the population of any other Hispanic nation. Well-written Mexican Spanish will be understood by anyone.

Kenneth Barger
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We all speak Castilian with slightly different accents. In Spain people speak Spanish and Castilian. The Castilian speakers don't use the z sound, just the s sound. People from the islands have a much thicker accent. In Spanish, people from different countries use different types of slang, just as they do in different areas of the United States, also different expressions. Many of the people we interpret for don't have any education and they mix English and Spanish, speaking Spanglish. In Mexico and Guatemala there are about 20 Indian languages based on the Mayan language and they are totally different from Spanish, for instance Tarasco. Hope this helps you. Those who speak Spanish basically can understand each other.

Eugenia Munday
Court, medical and social certified Spanish interpreter

The Spanish language is spoken in over 20 different countries. Therefore there are over 20 different Spanish dialects. For example, I am from Argentina. But I translate into a "neutral Spanish" familiar to most Spanish speaking countries. I would classify myself into the Latin-American Spanish.

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English and German into Spanish Translations
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Castilian Spanish would be the Spanish from Spain.

It's the "mother language" for all other Spanish "dialects" or "styles".

I would not consider them dialects per se. They are not different languages. You can communicate in any of the versions of Spanish and Spanish speaking people would understand you just fine, no matter if you're speaking Latin American or Castilian Spanish. The accents of the spoken language definitely vary, (such as accents in English from England, US and Australia vary) but you can still understand people just fine.

Castilian is "old world" Spanish, just as "British English" is the original, "old world" English. It uses a few linguistic expressions and forms that differ from Spanish from other countries, such as the pronouns and verb conjugation usage for the second person singular and plural (vosotros instead of Uds. and tú, instead of vos).

Latin American Spanish differs from country to country in the use of certain words and expression and in accents. A fluent Spanish speaking person can tell what country or region somebody comes from just by that accent or the particular use of certain words.

I am not aware of significant differences or peculiar language uses of Caribbean Spanish. I would consider it another form of Latin American Spanish, different from Old World Castilian Spanish in the ways mentioned above and with the peculiarities determined by each country.

In translating into Spanish, a good translator would be able to understand his or her particular language background and how it could influence his ability to communicate effectively. A good translator should always keep in mind the audience he or she is translating for.

When we translate documents or texts to be used here in the States, most of the time the translators have to use an "international" Spanish style and vocabulary, that would be easily understood by people from all backgrounds, whether Castilian or Latin American. This is how I personally translate documents.

To do so the translator has to understand the differences and be aware of "regionalisms" he or she might use in his or hers own native language and avoid using them in translations. This can make a great impact in the quality and effectiveness of the translation.

As a translator, if my audience is not particularly specified, I write in an international style. I know what words could be misunderstood and what language usages are regional and / or slang, as opposed to universal in the Spanish-speaking world. This knowledge comes from years of language studies and extensive reading and listening to different Spanish language styles.

I come from Argentina, Latin America, but when I translate I avoid using the typical Argentinean linguistic style and I streamline it.

I do not write Castilian either. But I could definitely do it if I knew my audience was from Spain and was expecting to read something in that particular style.

For example, for the use of color, I do not use "marrón" for "brown", because I know that is more of a "south American" word, where the rest of Latin American prefers the use of "café" to name that particular color. I also know that any person from South America, who reads "café", would perfectly understand that it is referring to the color brown, that's why I choose that word.

I avoid using the word "pileta" for swimming pool, and instead use "piscina", which I know to be more globally understood.

These are just examples.

That's part of what makes a great translator "great", and all this linguistic considerations are very important but not obvious to the client who may not be able to read or understand the final translation. The audience, though, the person or persons who would finally read and benefit from the translation, they are the ones who would appreciate and notice the difference in the clarity of concept and in the fluid style of writing.

I hope that this clarifies things a little bit for you and the entire team at FLS.

Best Regards,

Anabel Elliott, Spanish Translator and Interpreter.
