

How Many Spanishes Do You Speak?

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¿Habla Usted Español? Which one? Spanish comes in many flavors, which poses a problem for marketing researchers. Is it OK to devise a single survey and distribute it to a panel in Spain and in Argentina? Do Hispanics in the United States speak the same dialect as Mexicans? My client asked for a survey in Castilian; what does it mean?

Like other Romance languages, Spanish derives from Latin. It originated in the north of today's Spain and from there it spread throughout the Kingdom of Castile and eventually to Africa, South America, North America and Asia Pacific, as the Spanish colonial rule expanded between the 15th and 19th centuries.

Today, there are more native speakers of Spanish in the world than of English, and Spanish is the main language of 21 countries. The black areas on the map below show where Spanish is spoken as a primary language. The lighter gray indicates where it is not primarily spoken, but widely spoken as a second language (courtesy of Wikipedia Commons). Spanish enclaves not shown on the map include Canary Islands and Western Sahara, and also what was called the Spanish East Indies (Federated States of Micronesia, Guam, Marianas, Palau and the Philippines).



For marketing research companies, the sheer number of Spanish-speaking countries poses a challenge, since each country has its own flavor and peculiarities of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and colloquialisms. Below are some tips on how to navigate this *jungla*.

Spanish or Castilian?

In Spain, people call their language *español* (Spanish) when contrasting it with other languages such as English or French, but they call it *castellano* (Castilian - the language of the Castile region) when contrasting it with other languages spoken in Spain such as Galician, Basque, or Catalan. Similar distinction is made in the Americas.

In South America, the term *castellano* is widely used to describe the language as a whole rather than a regional variation. *Castellano* can be used as a generic term with no political or ideological links, the same way the word "Spanish" is used in English. Some speakers in the Americas use it to differentiate their own variety of Spanish as opposed to the variety of Spanish spoken in Spain.

When preparing surveys for Spanish-speaking countries, marketing research companies are sometimes bewildered when they are asked to use "Castilian." Rightly so, because without context it could mean just about any variety of Spanish. The only foolproof way of figuring out what flavor of Spanish is needed is to determine what country or countries are involved.

Spanish Dialects

The regional variants of Spanish can differ to a significant degree, particularly in pronunciation and vocabulary, but also to some degree in grammar as well. Examples of Spanish dialects in Spain include *canario* (from the Canary Islands), *andaluz* (from Andalusia), and *madrileño* (from Madrid). In Latin America we can speak of an Argentinean, a *porteño* (from Buenos Aires), a Chilean, or a Colombian dialect, among many others. The main difference is

between European Spanish and Spanish spoken in Latin America, but there are also variances within each region. The good news is that all Spanish dialects use the same written standard and that they are mutually intelligible. That does not mean, however, that a single version of your Spanish document or survey will do in any of the Spanish-speaking countries.

The differences in pronunciation are important in phone surveys and it is wise to select speakers of the given region to conduct the interview. For example, the word "Madrid" is pronounced in the capital of Spain as "Madrith," whereas in the bilingual areas of the East coast, and because of the contact between Spanish and Catalan, it becomes "Madrit." In the south, however, people tend to eliminate the final consonant and say "Madri".

Another example is the different pronunciation of "y" and "ll." "Ll" can be pronounced in Spain as English "j" ("calle" = "caje"), as English "y" ("calle" = "caye") or as "ly" ("calle" = "calye"). These three variants exist in one form or another in Latin America as well, even though in most Latin American countries the predominant sound is like English "y" and there is no difference between the pronunciation of "ll" and "y."

Vocabulary is another area of differentiation between dialects. An example of word variation within the Spanish peninsula is "candle." Candle is referred to as "vela" in the northern and center parts of Spain, but as "candela" in the South. Another example is a ballpoint pen, which is "un bolígrafo" in Spain, "una birome" in Argentina, "un lapicero" in Peru and Central America, "un esfero" in Colombia, and "una pluma" in Mexico.

One of the main differences between the dialects of Spain and those of Latin America is the use of pronouns. In Spain, the informal pronoun for the second person singular (in English "you") is "tú." However, some Latin American countries, (Argentina, Uruguay or Paraguay, for example) use "vos." The plural "you" also varies: in Spain people differentiate between an informal "vosotros" and a formal "ustedes," whereas this difference does not exist in Latin America.

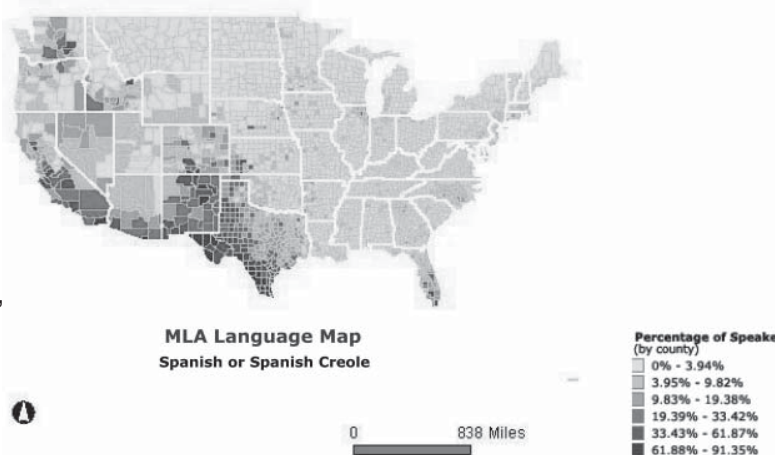
Spanish in the United States

There are about 50 million people in the United States whose native language is Spanish. The map adjacent shows the concentration of Spanish speakers by county (courtesy of the Modern

Language Association). Not surprisingly, the highest concentration is in Texas and California. Logically, the local variety of Spanish depends on where the Hispanic immigrants are mostly coming from. Thus the Mexican dialect is prevalent in California and Texas, whereas Cuban dialect prevails in Florida and Puerto Rican in New York City.

Spanish in the United States is not only shaped by the recent immigrants. As a matter of fact, Spanish was spoken in the areas that now make up the continental United States before English was introduced, and for centuries the two languages coexisted on equal footing. Linguists have identified a number of unique Spanish dialects within the United States, each traceable to 16th and 17th century Spain.

Other Spanish varieties in the United States (New Mexican, Arizonan, Texan, etc.) evolved independently of Spanish on the Iberian Peninsula and in Latin America and are distinctive because of their unique contact with Native American languages, with vocabulary enriched by indigenous languages, particularly in the Southwest.



Standard Spanish?

It is not always practical to localize your English text for every Spanish-speaking country you target. For example, it would be silly to localize your Web site into 20 different Spanish dialects; as a matter of fact, it would be hard to find a Web site even with two different Spanish versions. This is where standard (or neutral or common or international) Spanish comes in handy. The concept originated with the film industry, which, in an effort to

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Alert!

So, You Speak Spanish? Which One?

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save costs, started producing Spanish movies that worked across political and geographical borders. However, there is much controversy around this concept. While some linguists see it simply as the lowest common denominator for all the dialects, others view it as a correct educated standard for the Spanish language, and there are also those who claim that there is no such thing.


From the translation standpoint, it is possible to use “standard” or “neutral” Spanish. While there is no good workaround for the different uses of Spanish pronouns “vosotros/ustedes” or “tú/vos” (you just have to pick one, depending on whether the majority of your target audience is in Spain or not), it is always possible to use generic terminology and to avoid using colloquial phrases and idioms specific to certain countries. In particular, it is important to consider terminology and phrases that may be offensive in certain countries. For example, in some Spanish-speaking countries, words like tortilla and papaya are slang expressions for male and female unmentionables.

Best Practices

If your target audience covers Europe, United States and Latin America, you should definitely use two different versions of your survey: one for Spain and one for the rest. It is

not necessary to use multiple versions within the Americas, unless your client specifically requests it or unless you have a really good reason (such as conducting a linguistic survey).

On the other hand, if your panel is concentrated in a particular area, it is advisable to localize your survey for the specific audience. This could mean using Cuban dialect for a panel in Miami or Mexican dialect for a panel in Los Angeles. When working with a language services provider to localize your survey or other marketing research materials, make sure these questions are answered at the outset of the project. A professional provider will offer you advice regarding what dialect is the most appropriate for the given panel and will select the right team of translators and editors for your project. 

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