

TIMES INSIDER

# Savoring the Spanish of My Youth, as the Language Marches On

By SIMON ROMERO AUG. 23, 2017

ALBUQUERQUE — Something about the languages we speak fascinates me.

Roaming around Latin America as a correspondent for more than a decade, I wrote about Palenquero, a Creole language kept alive by descendants of runaway slaves in northern Colombia; Sranan Tongo, Suriname's lingua franca; Papiamentu, the vibrant language of Curaçao; and even learned how to say "Mba'éichapa?" — How are you? — in Guaraní, the indigenous language that holds sway in Paraguay.

When I returned to the United States in July, I wondered what it would be like to live in a country where the Spanish language is so politicized that some speakers are facing new hostility. I was puzzled as to why Spanish seemed so threatening in an English-speaking superpower. I asked myself, what does the future hold for Spanish in the United States and around the world?

Absorbed by these questions, I found myself savoring my re-encounter with Spanish as I set out to write about the language of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriela Mistral and Juan Felipe Herrera. I spent the last six years in Portuguese-speaking Brazil and relish speaking Portuguese every day — my wife and kids are Brazilian — but having the opportunity to speak a lot of Spanish again has provided me with a new glimpse into how languages, and societies, evolve.

I grew up speaking some New Mexican Spanish, but just enough to get by. I was envious of classmates who spoke it superbly. More than anything, though, we spoke

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Spanglish, the blend of Spanish and English that some south of the border derisively refer to as *casteyanqui* or *argot sajón*.

Before I reported from Brazil, I spent five years in Caracas, so the rapid-fire Spanish that now comes out of my mouth somehow sounds more Venezuelan than anything else; it includes a lot of dropped consonants and an array of inventive profanities that *caraqueños* of many ages comfortably use at the breakfast table.

Sometimes this makes me feel like a bit of a foreigner returning to New Mexico, the state where I grew up. But I quickly realized that I might feel the same way even if I'd never

left New Mexico, thanks to the surge in Spanish-speaking immigrants, largely from northern Mexico, who have followed their star here.

Whether in trips to the grocery store or in the Albuquerque sports bar where I watched Mexico's national soccer team play against Jamaica or at the flea market in my hometown, Las Vegas (population 13,000, not to be confused with the Nevada gambling mecca), I heard the Spanish of newcomers eclipsing the old Spanish of New Mexico.

It might go without saying, but I've quickly found that speaking Spanish is an invaluable asset for a journalist in these uncertain times, allowing me to break the ice with people who might otherwise be hesitant to tell their stories, while gleaning insight from Spanish-language radio, television and casual reflections on social media.

I still hear people speaking in the old way — saying, for instance, *No je* instead of *No sé* (I don't know). But despite all the political rancor over the languages we speak, and the fears of admonition or even deportation that might be associated with speaking Spanish in public, I still marvel at how immigrants are injecting new vitality into the language.

This might alarm purists who cling to the romanticized myth that the Spanish of northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado, enduring in geographic isolation for centuries, remains strikingly similar to the Golden Age Spanish of 16th-century Spain.

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As the scholars Garland Bills and Neddy Vigil point out, the reality of New Mexican Spanish is far more complex, reflecting various important phases of influence from Mexico. In 1680, for instance, Pueblo indigenous peoples in what was then called the province of Santa Fe de Nuevo México rose up against the terrorizing rule of their colonial overlords, killing hundreds and forcing 2,000 settlers to leave.

Historians note that most of those taking part in the Reconquista of 1692 were born in the New World, and spoke the Spanish of Mexico. With such contact and immigration unfolding over the centuries, words like *tecolote* (owl) or *cuates* (twins) with origins in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs in central Mexico, are still used in New Mexico.

Despite such replenishment from Mexico, New Mexican Spanish has faced one threat after another. In 1848, at the end of the Mexican-American War, the United States took control of the present-day states of California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona and Colorado, asserting the English language in these lands.

Nevertheless, Spanish flourished into the 20th century in New Mexico as the language of the Hispanic intelligentsia. But a century ago, another threat came during the nativist push to promote the English language and limit immigration, especially from Asia.

New Mexicans were well aware of the threats to Spanish when Teddy Roosevelt declared that the United States could not become a “polyglot boardinghouse,” writing protections for Spanish into the state constitution of 1912 that are still debated today.

“That was a very fiery era with a lot of conflict,” said Damián Vergara Wilson, a sociolinguist at the University of New Mexico. “Some dug in their heels in protecting and nurturing Spanish, some abandoned it.”

Despite its resurgence in recent decades, the Spanish language in the United States may now be at a similar juncture. For decades, linguists have documented how Hispanics descended from those early settlers in the Southwest are shifting to English. Even before the crackdown on immigration from Latin America intensified,

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children of Spanish-speaking immigrants were already embracing English to a large degree, just as descendants of other immigrants have done.

Languages are constantly in flux, exposed to the flow of history. Like English, Spanish spread around the world centuries ago through conquest, sometimes wiping out indigenous languages. In Spain itself, bitter memories persist over the efforts by the dictator Francisco Franco to silence languages other than Spanish, using, for instance, informants to report speakers of Basque to the police.

Still, trying to make one language the sole language of public life can backfire, bolstering resentment among people who feel marginalized and, in the case of Spain, even secessionist pressure. If geography is destiny, the proximity of the United States to Latin America could portend a different future for Spanish than other immigrant languages that have faded, like German, Italian or Polish.

In the meantime, Spanish is soldiering on without the explicit support of a superpower, somehow expanding in American lands where it could have disappeared decades ago. With more native speakers around the world than English, Spanish is also making inroads in other parts of the English-speaking world, like Belize in Central America.

One sign of the durability of Spanish might be in its appeal among speakers of other languages. Huge numbers of people around the world now study Spanish as a second language in countries like the United States, Brazil and France. Chinese authorities are lamenting a shortage of Spanish teachers amid surging demand for Spanish classes.

A report by the British Council, the official cultural arm of the British government, recently laid out which languages are crucial to learn, citing factors like trade, diplomacy, security priorities and prevalence on the internet.

The assessment in the country that is the cradle of the English language highlighted the allure of Arabic, Chinese, German and Russian. But the language deemed most important for Britons to learn? Spanish, with its influence on popular culture and “the access it offers to such a wide range of countries and cultures.”

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