10 Facts About the Spanish Language

By Gerald Erichsen
Updated January 02, 2019

Do you want to know more about the Spanish language? Here are 10 facts to get you started:

01 Spanish Ranks as World’s Number 2 Language

With 329 million native speakers, Spanish ranks as the world’s No. 2 language in terms of how many people speak it as their first language, according to Ethnologue. It is slightly ahead of English (328 million) but far behind Chinese (1.2 billion).

02 Spanish Is Spoken Around the World

Spanish has at least 3 million native speakers in each of 44 countries, making it the fourth-most widely spoken language behind English (112 countries), French (60), and Arabic (57). Antarctica and Australia are the only continents without a large Spanish-speaking population.

03 Spanish Is in the Same Language Family as English

Spanish is part of the Indo-European family of languages, which are spoken by more than a third of the world’s population. Other Indo-European languages include English, French, German, the Scandinavian languages, the Slavic languages and many of the languages of India. Spanish can be classified further as a Romance language, a group that includes French, Portuguese, Italian, Catalan and Romanian. Speakers of some of those, such as Portuguese and Italian, can often communicate with Spanish speakers to a limited extent.

04 Spanish Language Dates to at Least 13th Century

Although there is no clear boundary defining when the Latin of what is now the north-central area of Spain became Spanish, it is safe to say that the language of the Castile region became a distinct language in part because of efforts by King Alfonso in the 13th century to standardize the language for official use. By the time Columbus came to the Western Hemisphere in 1492, Spanish had reached the point where the language as spoken and written would be easily understandable today.

05 Spanish Is Sometimes Called Castilian

To the people who speak it, Spanish is sometimes called español and sometimes castellano (the Spanish equivalent of "Castilian"). The labels used vary regionally and sometimes according to political viewpoint. Although English speakers sometimes use "Castilian" to refer to the Spanish of Spain as opposed to that of Latin America, that isn't the distinction used among Spanish speakers.

06 If You Can Spell It, You Can Say It

Spanish is one of the world’s most phonetic languages. If you know how a word is spelled, you can almost always know how it is pronounced (although the reverse isn’t true). The main exception is recent words of foreign origin, which usually retain their original spelling.
07 | Royal Academy Promotes Consistency in Spanish

The Royal Spanish Academy (Real Academia Española), created in the 18th century, is widely considered the arbiter of standard Spanish. It produces authoritative dictionaries and grammar guides. Although its decisions do not have the force of law, they are widely followed in both Spain and Latin America. Among the language reforms promoted by the Academy have been the use of the inverted question mark and exclamation point (¿ and ¡). Although they have been used by people who speak some of the non-Spanish languages of Spain, they are otherwise unique to the Spanish language. Similarly unique to Spanish and a few local languages that have copied it is the ñ, which became standardized around the 14th century.

08 | Most Spanish Speakers Are in Latin America

Although Spanish originated on the Iberian Peninsula as a descendant of Latin, today it has far more speakers in Latin America, having been brought to the New World by Spanish colonization. There are minor differences in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation between the Spanish of Spain and the Spanish of Latin America, not so great as to prevent easy communication. The differences in the regional variations in Spanish are roughly comparable to the differences between U.S. and British English.

09 | Arabic Had a Huge Influence on Spanish Language

After Latin, the language that has had the biggest influence on Spanish is Arabic. Today, the foreign language exerting the most influence is English, and Spanish has adopted hundreds of English words related to technology and culture.

10 | Spanish and English Share Large Vocabulary

Spanish and English share much of their vocabulary through cognates, as both languages derive many of their words from Latin and Arabic. The biggest differences in the grammar of the two languages include Spanish’s use of gender, a more extensive verb conjugation, and the widespread use of the subjunctive mood.

After reading the article, fill in the chart.

- What squared with me
- What was point out
- I already knew that.
- That’s new info
- I still have questions about
- Still circling
**Traditional Drinks of Latin America**

Chicha is a beverage derived from the non-distilled fermentation of corn. Chicha has a long history in the indigenous cultures of many Latin American countries. Originally, it was the Incas who drank chicha during ceremonies and rituals. It has effects similar to alcohol but there are versions suitable for children too.

Yerba mate is a traditional drink that is drunk mainly in Argentina and Uruguay. It is a type of tea-like infusion and therefore taken hot filtered through a metal straw. It is particularly popular among the gauchos, or cowboys of this region. Yerba mate is a family and social ritual in Argentina and Uruguay and other countries in South America as well.

Hot chocolate or cacao was already a common beverage in the Americas 4,000 years ago. The Aztecs believed that the cocoa seeds were a gift from Quetzalcoatl, a god. Chocolate was prepared only as a bitter drink with spicy spices like chipotle and was thicker than today's sweetened versions.

Horchata is a popular drink in Latin America. It can be made of rice, seeds or nuts. A popular version found in Puerto Rico is made from ground sesame seeds. To make the drink water is boiled with sugar, vanilla and cinnamon. This infusion is then poured over ground sesame seeds and left to rest overnight. Other variants use ground almonds or even coconut milk.

Atole is a traditional drink made from corn that is Mesoamerican in origin and as such its name comes from the Nahuatl language. Atole is particularly popular during both the Christmas season and the Day of the Dead when it is paired with the traditional Mexican food of tamales also made of corn. Atole is served sweetened with sugar and also often contains cinnamon and vanilla.

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Traditional Drinks of Latin America

Name: 

1. What two traditional drinks are made of corn?

2. For what celebrations is atole popular?

3. Where is yerba mate drunk?

4. What can horchata be made of?

5. When was chicha traditionally taken?

6. What language does the word atole come from?

7. What indigenous group drank chocolate?

8. In what country is the sesame seed version of horchata popular?

9. What drink mentioned in this reading do you want to try and why?

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Spanish Vocabulary for Lent, Holy Week, and Easter

by Gerald Erichsen
Updated March 24, 2019

Easter is the most widely and ardently celebrated holiday in most of the Spanish-speaking world — even bigger than Christmas — and Lent is observed nearly everywhere. The week before Easter, known as Santa Semana, is a vacation week in Spain and most of Latin America, and in some areas, the vacation period extends to the following week. Thanks to their strong Roman Catholic heritage, most countries celebrate Holy Week by emphasizing the events leading up to the death of Jesus (Jesús or Jesucristo), often with large processions, with Easter set aside for family gatherings and/or carnival-like celebrations.

Words and Phrases

As you learn about Easter — or, if you’re fortunate, travel to where it’s celebrated — in Spanish, here are some words and phrases you’ll want to know.

el carnaval — Carnival, a celebration that takes place in the days immediately preceding Lent. Carnivals in Latin America and Spain are usually organized locally and last several days.

la cofradía — a brotherhood associated with a Catholic parish. In many communities, such brotherhoods have organized Holy Week observances for centuries.

la Crucifixión — the Crucifixion.

la Cuaresma — Lent. The word is related to cuarenta, the number 40, for the 40 days of fasting and prayer (Sundays not included) that take place during the period. It is often observed through various kinds of self-denial.

el Domingo de Pascua — Easter Sunday. Other names for the day include Domingo de Gloria, Domingo de Pascua, Domingo de Resurrección, and Pascua Florida.

el Domingo de Ramos — Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter. It commemorates the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem five days before his death. (A ramo in this context is a tree branch or a bunch of palm fronds.)
la Fiesta de Judas — a ceremony in parts of Latin America, usually held the day before Easter, in which an effigy of Judas, who betrayed Jesus, is hung, burned, or otherwise mistreated.

la Fiesta del Cuasimodo — a celebration held in Chile the Sunday after Easter.

los huevos de Pascua — Easter eggs. In some areas, painted or chocolate eggs are part of the Easter celebration. They are not associated with the Easter bunny in Spanish-speaking countries.

el Jueves Santo — Maundy Thursday, the Thursday before Easter. It commemorates the Last Supper.

el Lunes de Pascua — Easter Monday, the day after Easter. It is a legal holiday in several Spanish-speaking countries.

el Martes de Carnaval — Mardi Gras, the last day before Lent.

el Miércoles de Ceniza — Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. The main Ash Wednesday ritual involves having ashes imposed on one's forehead in the shape of a cross during Mass.

el mona de Pascua — a type of Easter pastry eaten primarily in the Mediterranean areas of Spain.

la Pascua de Resurrección — Easter. Usually, Pascua stands by itself as the word used most often to refer to Easter. Coming from the Hebrew pesah, the word for Passover, pascua can refer to almost any holy day, usually in phrases such as Pascua judía (Passover) and Pascua de la Natividad (Christmas).

el paso — an elaborate float that is carried in Holy Week processions in some areas. The pasos typically carry representations of the Crucifixion or other events in the Holy Week story.

la Resurrección — the Resurrection.

la rosca de Pascua — a ring-shaped cake that is part of the Easter celebration in some areas, especially Argentina.

el Sábado de Gloria — Holy Saturday, the day before Easter. It is also called Sábado Santo.

la Santa Cena — The Last Supper. It is also known as la Última Cena.

la Santa Semana — Holy Week, the eight days that begin with Palm Sunday and end with Easter.

el vía crucis — This phrase from Latin, sometimes spelled as viacrucis, refers to any of the 14 Stations of the Cross (Estaciones de la Cruz) representing the stages of Jesus' walk (sometimes called la Vía Dolorosa) to Calvary, where he was crucified. It is common for that walk to be re-enacted on Good Friday. (Note that vía crucis is masculine even though vía by itself is feminine.)

el Viernes de Dolores — Friday of Sorrows, also known as Viernes de Pasion. The day to recognize the suffering of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is observed one week before Good Friday. In some areas, this day is recognized as the start of Holy Week. Pasion here refers to suffering just as "passion" can in a liturgical context.

Task: Create vocabulary squares for 16 terms; include term and a quick sketch.

https://www.bought.co.com/spanish-vocabulary-for-lent-and-easter-3079391?print
Where Did the Ñ Come From?

by Gerald Erichsen
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Question: Where did the ñ come from?

Answer: As you could probably guess, the ñ came originally from the letter n. The ñ does not exist in Latin and is the only Spanish letter of Spanish origins.

Beginning in about the 12th century, Spanish scribes (whose job it was to copy documents by hand) used the tilde placed over letters to indicate that a letter was doubled (so that, for example, nn became ñ and aa became á).

I'm not sure why they used the tilde, except perhaps that it was quick to write, although it may be no coincidence that it is shaped vaguely like an N. The tilde was used not only with the n but with other letters as well.

The popularity of the tilde for other letters eventually waned, and by the 14th century, the ñ was the only place it was used. Its origins can be seen in a word such as año (which means "year"), as it comes from the Latin word annus with a double n. As the phonetic nature of Spanish became solidified, the ñ came to be used for its sound, not just for words with an nn. A number of Spanish words, such as señal and campaña, that are English cognates use the ñ where English uses "gn," such as in "signal" and "campaign," respectively.

The Spanish ñ has been copied by two other languages that are spoken by minorities in Spain. It is used in Euskara, the Basque language that is unrelated to Spanish, to represent approximately the same sound as it has in Spanish.

It is also used in Galician, a language similar to Portuguese. (Portuguese uses nh to represent the same sound.)

Additionally, three centuries of Spanish colonial rule in the Philippines led to the adoption of many Spanish words in the national language, Tagalog (also known as Pilipino or Filipino).

The ñ is among the letters that have been added to the traditional 20 letters of the language.

And while the ñ isn't part of the English alphabet, it frequently is used by careful writers when using adopted words such as jalapeño, piña colada or piñata and in the spelling of various personal and place names.

In Portuguese, the tilde is placed over vowels to indicate that the sound is nasalized. That use of the tilde has no apparent direct connection with the use of the tilde in Spanish.

Addendum: After this article was published, I received the following letter which has some excellent information:

Thanks for including the interesting page on the history of the ñ in the about.com pages.

In a few places you express uncertainty about some of the details of this history; below I offer the information you need to complete the story.

"Although it may be no coincidence that it is shaped vaguely like an N." It is in fact no coincidence! The reason the "tilde" appears over an N (as in Latin ANNU > Sp. año) and Portuguese vowels (Latin MANU > Po. mão) is that scribes wrote a small letter N over the preceding letter in both cases, to save space in manuscripts (parchment was expensive). As the two languages developed phonetically away from Latin, the double N sound of Latin morphed into the current palatal nasal sound of the ñ, and Portuguese N between vowels got deleted, leaving its nasal quality on the vowel. So readers and writers began to use the old
spelling trick to indicate the new sounds that did not exist in Latin. (It's really nice the way you framed the Ñ as the only Spanish letter of Spanish origin!)

Also of potential interest to your readers:

The word "tilde" actually refers to both the squiggle over the Ñ as well as the accent mark used to mark phonetic stress (e.g., café). There is even the verb "tildarse", which means, "to be written with an accent mark, to stress", as in "La palabra 'cafè' se tilda en la e".

The unique character of the letter Ñ has led to its becoming a marker of Hispanic identity in recent years. There is now a "generación Ñ", the children of Spanish-speaking parents in the U.S. (parallel to Generation X, etc.), a stylized Ñ is the logo of the Cervantes Institute (http://www.cervantes.es), and so forth.

The squiggle under the ç in Portuguese and French has a similar origin as the Ñ. It is called a "cedille", meaning "little Z." It comes from the diminutive of the Old Spanish name for the letter Z, ceda. It was used to represent the "ts" sound in Old Spanish, which no longer exists in the language. E.g., O.Sp. caza (katsa) = Mod. Sp. caza (casa or catha).

Restaurants in the U.S. now offer dishes made with a very spicy pepper, the habanero, which is frequently mispronounced and misspelled as habañero. Since the name comes from La Habana, the capital of Cuba, this pepper should not have Ñ. I think the name has been contaminated by jalapeño, which of course is simply a pepper from Jalapa, Mexico.

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Questions for article ‘Where Did the Ñ Come From?’

1. What is the only Spanish letter of Spanish origin?
2. What is the origin of the other Spanish letters?
3. Why did Spanish scribes use the tilde in the 12th century?
4. What is one possible reason that the tilde has the shape it has?
5. After the 14th century, what was the reason behind a tilde?
6. What other languages use the tilde?
7. Why would the tilde be used in English?
8. How does the additional information confirm or deny the reason the tilde has its shape?
9. Who are members of ‘la generación Ñ’ (the Ñ Generation)?
10. What is the ‘pepper’ mix up about?
Hispanic Myths and Legends: El Cadejo

Directions: Read the article about El Cadejo and answer the questions

Paso 1: Read the story to learn about the legend of El Cadejo as told throughout Southern Mexico and Central America

There are a pair of spirit dogs called Los Cadejos, one white and one black that roam at night. They are large and shaggy with glowing red eyes and are sometimes portrayed as having goats’ hooves.

The Cadejo Blanco protects good people as they walk at night. He especially protects people who may have been drinking and are out late. He walks them to their door and then with the first rays of the sunset the cadejo walks to the horizon and disappears until the next night when he will be needed to help someone else.

The Cadejo Negro is an evil spirit that seeks to kill both good and bad people. However, since the good people are protected by the Cadejo Blanco, he usually only succeeds in killing the bad ones.

In some countries the dogs appear to be attached by a chain (una cadena) which is where the name Los Cadejos comes from.

Paso 2: Comprehension Questions

1. What type of animal is the Cadejo?  
2. What does it generally look like?  
3. Which cadejo protects people walking home at night?  

4. Which cadejo tries to attack people at night? Who are the only people this cadejo is usually successful in attacking?  

5. Where does the name Los Cadejos come from?  

Paso 3: Draw a picture of the two Cadejos based on what you read
Paso 4: In the legend of Los Cadejos, the Cadejo Blanco serves as a protector of the good. Long ago, the indigenous cultures Central America, including the Mayans, also believed that animals were the protectors of men. They believed that from the moment you were born you were accompanied by a spirit animal that would protect and guide you. Look at the descriptions below of several spirit animals (called nahuales) and decide, if you were Mayan, which animal would most likely have been your protector. Explain your choice.

Which spirit animal would you choose?

Why?