

A CULTURAL APPROACH TO THE SPANISH LANGUAGE

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1 Introduction

1.1 *The concept of culture and intercultural communication*

Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a specific group of people who share language, religion, social habits, music, art, etc. Their patterns of behaviour and interaction are learned by socialisation, which creates social norms. Social norms form a system that allows us to judge others' behaviour and our own. Our culture determines how we see the world, how we think, what we wear, how we wear it, what we believe is right or wrong, how we talk to other people... Therefore, verbal and nonverbal communication among people from different cultures who use their own culture as a guide condition their perceptions and acts, and this also forms the base for the judgement of other people's behaviour. There are different limits of tolerance in every culture depending on its social norms, and we tend to reject conducts that are out of those limits. It should be noted that even within one culture there are always differences depending on the social class, level of education, age, region, country, etc. It is difficult to separate the individual from the archetype, so it often happens that the general behaviour does not apply to every person, but it usually does to a vast majority.

In the following chapters, we will try to explain some peculiarities of the Spanish culture which could cause a culture shock to those unaware of the social norms behind them.

1.2 *The evolution of the Spanish language in social interactions*

When we speak a foreign language, it is vital to understand and properly use the forms of addressing people. In the case of Spanish, this aspect of the language has changed a lot in the past fifty years – especially in Spain. Below, we will examine the current use of the formal and informal “you” and honorifics (formal and academic titles).

1.2.1 *Formal and informal pronouns*

The Spanish language has formal and informal pronouns which indicate different levels of politeness or familiarity. Other languages, such as English, lack this kind of distinction.

This is a comparison between Spanish and Czech:

	Spanish - Spain	Czech	
Singular	Tú Usted	Ty Vy	Informal Formal
Plural	Vosotros (M) Vosotras (F) Ustedes	Vy Vy	Informal Formal

	Spanish - Latin America	Czech	
Singular	*Tú / Vos Usted	Ty Vy	Informal Formal
Plural	Ustedes	Vy	Informal Formal

**Tú / Vos* are used in different countries and, sometimes, for different purposes.

The use of these informal and formal pronouns can be expressed as:

Tutear	Tykání
Tratar “de usted”	Vykání

The use of *tú/vosotros* in the most part of Spain is much more frequent than in most of the languages in which these variants also exist. It is used between friends and people around the same age, but also between teachers and students (especially at university) and often with waiters, shop assistants, taxi drivers, and other workers from the service sector (especially when they are young). Foreigners from cultures in which the formal treatment prevails might find it very shocking. The fact is that the older generations are also surprised by how fast things have changed since they were young and by how widely spread this is now.

During the 1970s, Spain experienced a series of progressive changes in politics, culture, and society. The very strict rules of the dictatorship regime were slowly adopting a new shape. For instance, the authority figure of teachers and professors turned into a more approachable and familiar one. The use of *tú* and first names started to promote more open and trustworthy relationships. *Usted* started to remind people of the old manners of servility that accentuated the differences in origin, status, and social class. The society tended to create more cooperative, productive, and equalitarian relationships. This is the generation who fought for democracy and favoured liberalism, and from that moment on, the fight for tolerance and equality has only increased. Another theory is that the big influence of the television also had an impact on the language.

Nowadays, most Spaniards feel much more comfortable with the generalised use of *tú* because it eliminates the feeling of distance which *usted* implies and creates a friendly atmosphere which facilitates building good relationships. However, it is sometimes difficult to interact with strangers because nobody is completely sure whether they should address them formally or informally. As a rule, if you are addressing someone you do not know, or elderly people, it is

best to use *usted* to be polite and show respect. Nevertheless, many people (even elderly) will soon afterwards ask you not to because they want to eliminate that barrier and talk as equals, or they might say “I am not that old” and feel like they should not receive any special treatment. The fact is that many people feel flattered if they are addressed informally because the use of *tú* and *usted* is very closely linked to age.

1.2.2 Honorifics

These are the most commonly used titles in Spanish-speaking countries:

señor (Sr.) mister (Mr.)		señor García
señora (Sra.) missus (Mrs.)	+ surname	señora García
señorita (Srta.) miss (Ms.)		señorita García

The use of *señora* and *señorita* can be a difficult subject as in Spanish-speaking cultures it is related to how old women look. In general, women who look under 40, who are unmarried or have no children are referred to as *señorita* and anyone who looks over 40, married or who has children is referred to as *señora*. Therefore, some women might feel a bit offended if they are addressed as *señora* while still being under 40.

When we do not know someone's name but need to call them, we can say *¡Señor!* (or *señora/señorita*) to get their attention. Other than that, the use of these titles has declined to a point that it is only common to hear them in professional environments. What is more, it would not be unusual to see the ‘name + surname(s)’ replacing this form. For example:

May I please speak to Mr. Fernández?		¿Puedo hablar con el señor Fernández, por favor?
		¿Puedo hablar con Antonio Fernández, por favor?

If we compared these to the use of *usted*, the contexts in which we could use them would be similar. Except for when we talk to strangers, or in this case, people we have just met and have told us their name, no matter their age. When two people are introduced to each other, they immediately use each other’s first name. If the encounter happens in a formal setting, for example, at work, the same rule prevails unless one of them has an important position in the company. This does not apply, however, to schools or universities. If the use of *usted* is uncommon, addressing a teacher as *señor García* would certainly be very strange nowadays. The preferred form is first names – even diminutives, for example: Manuel → Manolo, Alejandro → Alex, Ignacio → Nacho, Teresa → Tere, Ángeles → Geles, Concepción → Concha.

2 Verbal communication

2.1 Greetings

There are cultural differences in the way we greet people. A common example would be the use of *how are you?* in the USA. Some nationalities would be surprised by the lack of interest behind that question, but the fact is that the person saying that could also feel uncomfortable if someone answered sincerely and told them how bad they are feeling. In Spanish, *¿qué tal?* is usually a greeting and not a question per se. We would expect an answer from the other person, which would typically be *bien ¿y tú?*- *good and you?* no matter whether those are their actual feelings. However, depending on the situation, it could also be used as a conversation starter. We would know because, in that case, the person would probably stop or look at us intently waiting for us to say something. Although, usually, the generic *¿qué tal?* would be substituted by a more intentional question, such as: *¿cómo te va?*, *¿cómo va todo?*, *¿qué tal estás?*, *¿qué es de tu vida?* Regarding the answer, telling the other person how we are feeling would depend on the degree of informality we feel is okay for that situation. For example, it is very normal to tell friends and people we know if we are not doing great or if we are very happy, because we know that if they asked, it probably means they are genuinely interested in knowing. However, doing so with colleagues or people we have just met could create an uncomfortable situation. In general, it is best to avoid sharp answers, especially when they are negative. Compare:

¿Qué tal?	Mal Fatal
	Tirando Como siempre No me puedo quejar Nada nuevo Ninguna novedad

The first might sound shocking even between friends. It really forces the other person to ask why, so it should be avoided unless we intentionally want to cause concern. It would be unacceptable in any other context because it sounds rude.

The second could express a bit of negativity. It is a more neutral tone that shows some apathy. It is a way of being more honest without causing any nuisance because the other person will sense something slightly negative but will not feel any pressure to ask why. In any case, it would not be used in a formal context.

2.2 Requests

According to a study conducted by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), Argentinians made 40 % of their requests using imperative sentences, whereas Australians only used them in 20 % of the cases.

This clearly shows a difference between English and Spanish, and it happens with other languages too. It is this particular aspect of the language that creates stereotypes such as “Spanish speakers lack politeness and good manners”, but it is in fact just a cultural clash that also creates stereotypes such as “the British are absurdly polite and are constantly apologising”.

Examples:

Me tienes que dejar tu libro - You must lend me your book

It is obvious that if English speakers translated this sentence, they would be offended by the severity of this command. These are some other common examples:

Déjame un boli - Lend me a pen

Cierra la puerta - Close the door

In many languages, this would be unacceptable. However, the Spanish perspective is completely different. It is considered unnecessary to use very complex structures such as *¿podrías por favor cerrar la puerta? - Could you please close the door?* especially when asking something as simple as closing the door or borrowing a book or a pen. Those are reserved for other occasions when there is a need to really show good manners or when asking a big favour. Using this kind of language too often is believed to sound insincere. It is the same case as saying thank you all the time. Showing gratitude is pertinent when the action which we are thankful for is truly generous. For that reason, they often find English or German speakers, for instance, distant, complicated, and pedantic. The more complex the structure, the less often it is used.

Examples:

Pásame la sal	↓	Frequent
¿Me pasas la sal?		
¿Puedes pasarme la sal?		
¿Podrías pasarme la sal?		
¿Te importaría pasarme la sal?	↓	Unusual

In addition, *por favor* (please) is usually omitted in informal situations too.

2.3 Invitations

Invitations are considered inherently polite, but not all of them are always genuine. Sometimes, the act of inviting is common courtesy, and it is meaningless. For example, sentences such as *pásate por casa cuando quieras – come over anytime* do not imply that the person can actually

come anytime. Another example would be inviting someone to stay for lunch or dinner when they are at home because they came to visit. What the person inviting us could mean is that it is getting late and they would like to eat, but do not want to directly ask us to leave – which would be very rude. To make sure they truly want us to stay, we could say we should be going and wait for them to insist. If they do not insist much, we know it is time for us to leave. Even if we knew they really mean it, it would still be polite not to accept straight away.

2.3.1 *Rejecting invitations*

Spaniards find it very hard to say no. What usually happens is they beat about the bush, meaning they use vague sentences like *a ver si tengo tiempo – I'll see if I have time* or *a ver si puedo – let's see if I can make it*. This answer is commonly interpreted as a negative without further ado. However, a person not familiar with this norm, might feel the urge to insist or ask the person to get to the point, which would upset them and make them feel awkward, as this is something which is socially accepted and even considered well-mannered. Another example is accepting the invitation and cancelling on the last minute, pretending to be sick or using some other excuse, just to avoid admitting we do not want to do something from the beginning. Even though this could be seen as hypocrisy, in this culture it is regarded as polite.

2.4 *Making conversation*

2.4.1 *Small talk and fear of silence*

The use of small talk in Spain is very high because there is a generalised fear of silence in communicative situations. For example, when meeting someone for the first time, the tendency is to talk for a relatively long time about very impersonal matters. Asking something too personal too soon might be regarded as lack of respect. Nevertheless, not talking at all would not be any better. In general, people try to find something in common and use it to keep the conversation going. It is very easy to do so if we are, for example, at a cultural event, at a sports event, in a classroom, etc. If there is not such context, then the safest option is always the weather, which is proven to be the most popular topic.

It is also frequent among friends, which is considered as superficial and totally unnecessary by other cultures which would rather discuss something more personal or more serious matters. However, Spaniards are used to having carefree conversations when going out because the aim of doing that is to have fun, so they would rather leave those discussions for a different context. We should not expect to talk about the economy or religion at a meeting with friends at the pub.

2.4.2 Interruptions

If we observed a conversation in a group of people, we would probably notice that if you want to say something next, you must start talking before the other person finishes so that others know it is now your turn or that you want to reply to something. A study from Cestero Mancera (1994) showed that 43 % of speaking turn changes were made by interrupting, which is very shocking for those who are not used to it. Many people find it hard to adapt to this, and it is also due to the fact that Spanish speakers tend to make shorter pauses at the end of their speech. This leads to the problem of rising the volume as if it were a fight in which whoever speaks louder is the one who gets the right to be heard.

2.5 The importance of intonation

Every language has its own unique intonation; Spanish is no exception. The problem we encounter from the difference between languages, for example, Germanic or Slavic, is usually that a person who transfers their mother tongue intonation could sound unfriendly and authoritative. As seen in section 2.2, Spanish tends to use imperative sentences a lot. The reason why it is acceptable to do so is because the intonation softens the command, instead of words such as please, could you..., would you..., etc. Native speakers use rising intonation which sounds like a question to sound friendly and polite.

2.6 Volume and speed

Spanish speakers articulate a big concentration of syllables in very short periods of time. This makes Spanish to rank among the fastest spoken languages in the world. If we add this to the fact that Spanish speakers also tend to talk much louder than many other cultures, then conflicts appear. For a person who is not used to constantly hearing a raised voice and does not understand the language, it might feel like they are being yelled at. The speed and volume of the Spanish language can cause the false impression of being attacked or insulted.

It is obvious that in many public places, such as bars, restaurants, or street areas, it is sometimes necessary to raise our voice considerably to be heard. Many foreigners feel uneasy in these situations, but the fact is that most Spaniards feel the same when they travel abroad because their silence and quiet atmosphere feels completely lifeless to them.

3 Nonverbal communication

3.1 Gestures and expression

Most people are familiar with the stereotype of enthusiastic Spaniards having conversations at top volume while constantly moving their hands. In general, this hand waving is used for emphasis, but there is a whole range of Spanish hand signals with very specific meanings, which sometimes can even substitute words. (See '[Annex - Spanish gestures](#)' for examples.)

3.2 Visual contact


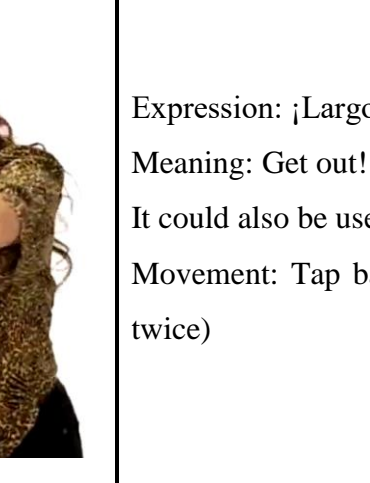
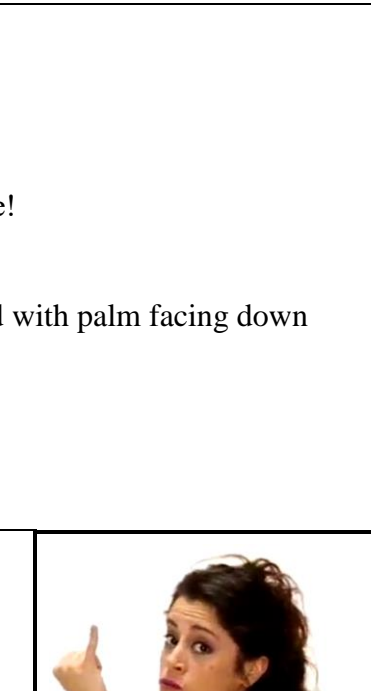
As in many other Western countries, looking a person in the eye shows self-confidence and openness. Keeping eye contact with the person we are talking to shows that we are paying attention and is considered a sign of respect. Not doing so could give the feeling we have something to hide or that we are bored. At the same time, too much eye contact can become awkward and be interpreted as aggressive.

3.3 Physical contact and interpersonal space

Most cultures feel uncomfortable with the proximity between them and people from Mediterranean countries when having a conversation. This happens, for instance, to Northern Europeans talking to Greeks, Italians, or Spaniards because the distance they keep with members of their own culture is usually larger. Preferences about personal space vary among individuals and especially across cultures. Spaniards, in general, place themselves in a position which would allow physical contact between them, as it is normal to do so while talking to acquaintances and friends. This is a habit which usually leads to misunderstandings and discomfort. Spain is one of the countries with a higher tolerance on the invasion of personal space, so it is perfectly accepted to do things like: touch the other person's arm while talking; place a hand on someone's shoulder; place a hand on someone's back for a short period of time; and, of course, greet each other with a kiss on both cheeks – although they do not actually kiss their cheeks; they brush them and make a kissing sound.

This has a huge impact on the way we react, understand, and feel about each other. Both cultures could be threatened by each other's behaviour: one would feel unsettled by the lack of respect for their personal space, while the other might feel disconcerted by the lack of affection and coldness perceived on their partner's conduct.

4 Annex – Spanish gestures

	<p>Expression: ¡Qué fuerte!</p> <p>Meaning: Wow!</p> <p>Movement: Shake hand with palm facing down</p>
<p>Expression: Como un palo / Como un fideo</p> <p>Meaning: This thin (when talking about sudden or dramatic weight loss or someone very skinny)</p> <p>Movement: Hold up one pinky finger</p>	
	<p>Expression: ¡Largo de aquí! / ¡Vete!</p> <p>Meaning: Get out! / Get lost!</p> <p>It could also be used to say we are leaving.</p> <p>Movement: Tap back of hand with palm (usually twice)</p>

Expression: Cagado de miedo

Meaning: Shit scared (vulgar) / Very scared

Movement: Pinch neck with index finger and thumb



Expression: ¡Qué cara más dura! / ¡Vaya cara dura! / ¡Menuda cara!

Meaning: How cheeky! / What a nerve!

Movement: Tap cheek with fingers or with palm facing towards or away from face

Expression: Ya veremos / Ya hablaremos

Meaning: We'll see / We'll talk about it

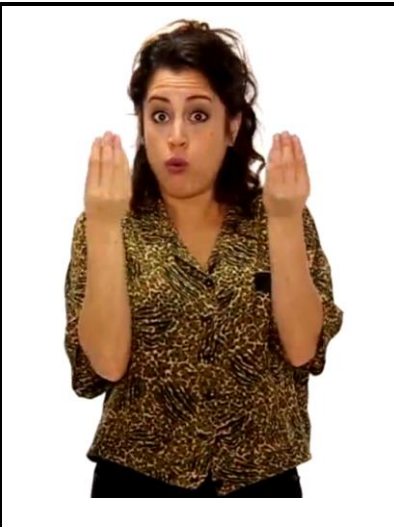
Movement: Make circles with index finger repeatedly





Expression: Es muy caro
Meaning: It's very expensive. It could also be used while talking about someone who has a lot of money.
Movement: Rub fingers with thumb repeatedly

Expression: ¡Está así! / ¡Está así de gente! / ¡Está lleno!
Meaning: It's packed! (full of people)
Movement: Open and close fingers with thumb repeatedly



Expression: Estoy a dos velas
Meaning: I'm broke
Movement: Repeatedly brush fingers downwards

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