



## Spanish speakers get together to discuss the future of their language

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**Theme:** The Third International Conference on the Spanish Language was held in Rosario, Argentina, from 17 to 20 November 2004

**Summary:** Following the conferences held at Zacatecas (Mexico) in 1997 and Valladolid (Spain) in 2001, Spanish speakers have gathered for the third time for an international conference to debate on the present and future of the Spanish language. The prospects for what many consider the world's second international language after English are promising, although some clouds have yet to be dispelled with regard to the educational and technological progress of its speakers. On the other hand, despite being of the most numerous and compact linguistic domains on earth, most Spanish-speaking countries have to deal with the issue of diversity. Combining linguistic unity and respect for different identities was one of the concerns of this year's conference, whose motto was 'linguistic identity and globalization'.

**Analysis:** Over the space of four days, 160 experts, 600 journalists and some two thousand participants gathered in Rosario (Argentina) for the Third International Conference of the Spanish Language. King Juan Carlos of Spain and President Kirchner of Argentina opened the Conference on Wednesday, 17 November.

This *souple* and solely linguistic Hispanic version of the *Francophonie* was conceived during the Seville Universal Exhibition of 1992, part of the celebrations surrounding the Quincentennial of the discovery of America. Spain was then looking for arguments to re-launch its links with Spanish America, marked for too long by memories of the colonial past and the traditional rhetoric of *raza* (race) and *madre patria* (motherland).

The Spanish language is a powerful argument. It is the national language and the language prevailing in government and education in twenty countries. Only English and French are official in more countries. In countries where Spanish is official, the average proportion of Spanish mother-tongue speakers is over 90%, far ahead of French and English, respectively with 35% and 28%. Three hundred and fifty million people speak Spanish as their mother tongue. Spanish is one of the five official languages at the United Nations and is an official language of the European Union and also of American regional organizations.

As with other international languages, Spanish has an economic dimension too. It is the language of a big, growing middle-income market for cultural industries. Spain alone is the world's fifth largest producer of books (by number of titles) and the eighth largest

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consumer of films shown in cinemas. The entertainment and media market in Latin America is expected to grow by 6.5% in 2004-08 according to a study by Price Waterhouse Coopers. In the US alone there are 40 daily and 300 weekly newspapers, three national TV channels and thousands of radio stations that use Spanish as their main language.

The existence of a common language has also been pointed out as a competitive advantage for Spanish-speaking investors seeking to start up a business in other Spanish-speaking countries. During the 1990s, Spain became the leading foreign investor in Latin America and according to some polls many executives perceive that a common language and culture, shared values and similar political experiences offer a distinct opportunity. Whether or not language is a factor in business, investments in America have allowed Spanish companies to gain in size and prepared them to compete in other markets.

There is also a market for teaching Spanish as a foreign language. No comprehensive study has yet been made of the teaching of Spanish world-wide, but we do have some indications about how much demand has increased in recent years. Enrolments in the language courses offered by the Instituto Cervantes, the official agency for the promotion of Spanish world-wide, rose from 81,700 in 2002-03 to 93,000 in 2003-04. According to *La Nación*, the Argentine daily, the number of private language schools offering courses in Spanish as a foreign language in Buenos Aires grew from five to 16 in 2002-04.

Who wants to learn Spanish and why? According to Víctor García de la Concha, Director of the *Real Academia Española* (or Royal Academy of the Spanish Language, the guardian of an impossible purity of the language since the Age of Enlightenment), it is because Spanish is 'practical', 'easy' and has a comparatively strong unity, meaning that a Chilean and a Catalan can understand each other with no great difficulty. Naturally, reasons vary from one country to another and from one person to another.

As an example, we can focus on the Instituto Cervantes in Utrecht (The Netherlands). Most of its Dutch students are aged around 25-45, with an equal balance between males and females and generally with a higher education. Young people in the Netherlands complete their secondary education speaking two or three foreign languages decently and, if they choose to study it, Spanish is usually their third or fourth foreign language. Most of the Instituto Cervantes' students in Utrecht want to learn Spanish to travel or to use it with friends or family; professional reasons appear only in the third place. Among the Cervantes' students in Germany there is also a preference for Spanish as an expressive language –'I like speaking it'– rather than as an instrumental language –'I need to speak it'– ([http://cvc.cervantes.es/obref/anuario/anuario\\_02/lamo/p09.htm](http://cvc.cervantes.es/obref/anuario/anuario_02/lamo/p09.htm)). The relation is the reverse in the US, at least in areas such as Florida where in certain sectors salaries are higher for those who are fluent in English and Spanish.

As a foreign language, Spanish often competes for second place in the preferences of modern language students, always trailing behind English... except in some English-speaking countries. In the US, almost 60% of modern-language students choose Spanish at college. PhDs in Spanish Language and Literature outnumbered those in French and German during the 1990s. In recent years, Spanish-speaking countries as a whole have become a preferred foreign destination for US students, second only to other English-speaking countries ([www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/461.asp](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/461.asp)). Spain is the prime

destination in the Erasmus university-exchange programme, which moves thousands of students every year throughout Europe.

Spanish studies are no novelty in the US, where Latin America has always been a permanent although secondary focus of its foreign policy. Their recent boost, however, has had more to do with the increasing number of US citizens of Hispanic origin. According to the US Census Bureau, 28.5 million Americans claim to speak Spanish at home.

And yet their integration into American society is an unstoppable process. To reach their Hispanic constituencies, the candidates in the latest presidential elections again resorted to the language of Miguel de Cervantes, this time around with a far better pronunciation than in 2000. Thanks to its growing purchasing power, the Hispanic minority of the US will soon become the world's richest Spanish-speaking community. Samuel Huntington's prophecy about a divisive clash between the Latin-American culture and the Anglo-Saxon and Protestant pillars of the American nation is unlikely to be fulfilled, but a strong minority with a taste for their Hispanic roots and a desire to maintain or recover their ancestors' language will linger on for decades to come. According to Humberto López Morales, the Secretary of the Association of the Academies of the Spanish Language (ASELE), 120,000 Hispanics are learning Spanish in Florida.

After the US, Brazil is probably the second market for Spanish as a foreign language. The creation of Mercosur in 1991 (the South American common market formed by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay) and the arrival in Brazil of Spanish companies during the 1990s gave momentum to the teaching of Spanish. Demand in the private sector is on the rise and whether it spreads to the public sector depends only on human and financial resources.

In other parts of the world the presence of Spanish is weaker. In the Arab world Spanish is generally considered with a certain remote sympathy, but Spanish speakers are few and far between, excepting small and disperse groups of Sephardic Jews around the Mediterranean basin who continue to speak the old Judeo-Spanish language, preserved since their expulsion from Spain at the end of the XV century. Northern Morocco still retains some Spanish influence, revived after the end of colonial rule by trade, tourism, migration and TV. In Equatorial Guinea, Spanish is still used as the language of communication between speakers of different native languages, although Spain's active cooperation and economic presence is failing to prevent the spread of English as the main *lingua franca*.

Spaniards were among the first Europeans to reach South-East Asia, but the linguistic traces left by them are limited to some dialects in Guam and the Philippines (where the country's first Constitution was written in Spanish), the actual designation of these islands –named after King Philip II of Spain) and the names of millions of Filipinos. Many of them adopted Spanish surnames after a decree requiring them to adopt permanent surnames issued in 1849 by Narciso Clavería, Governor and Captain General of the Philippines (information courtesy of Miguel de Avendaño).

After the loss of the Philippines in the Spanish-American War of 1898, Spain's presence in Asia declined, although this could begin to change as the leading Asian economies start to think globally. According to a recent survey by the Elcano Royal Institute, 39% of the Japanese interviewed found the idea of learning Spanish attractive ([www.realinstitutoelcano.org/publicaciones/libros/librojapon.pdf](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/publicaciones/libros/librojapon.pdf)). China would appear to be

the most promising market for the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language, as indeed it is for any sector of the economy. This is especially so following China's recent investment moves in Latin America. Disseminating language and culture is also considered an effective entry strategy for countries such as Spain that are aiming to improve their presence in the region.

Although the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language can be considered a growing economic asset world-wide, by number of speakers the world's leading Spanish-language nation will continue to be Mexico for quite some time. Alongside its European language, Mexico has one of the most refined pre-Columbian heritages in America. The Mexican government organised the First International Conference of the Spanish Language in 1997, in Zacatecas. Months ago, the Universidad Autónoma de México (UNAM), the biggest university in the Spanish world, signed an agreement with Spain's Instituto Cervantes to develop a common certificate of Spanish as a Foreign Language. The certificate serves to unite American Spanish and European Spanish and will be valid on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Second Conference was held in Valladolid, Spain, in 2001. The *Real Academia Española* coordinates the work of all similar academies throughout the world in order to maintain common standards by means of 'pan-Hispanic' dictionaries and grammar books. The Instituto Cervantes ([www.cervantes.es](http://www.cervantes.es)), established in 1991, is much younger than its forerunners, the British Council and the Goethe Institut, but plays a similar role in teaching the language and spearheading Spain's cultural diplomacy.

The full records of the first and second conferences can be found at the Instituto's website –[www.cvc.es](http://www.cvc.es)–, which received 623,000 visits in September of 2004. Enthusiasts of the Spanish language will also be interested in [www.cervantesvirtual.com](http://www.cervantesvirtual.com), where thousands of Spanish classics are available on-line. These are only two examples of how popular language has become in recent years, to the extent that it is not rare to find dictionaries and grammar books on the bestseller lists.

Another interesting development has been the use of new technologies in linguistic services and research. In 1995, the Royal Spanish Academy started to digitize its three hundred year old lexicographical archive. In addition of offering its dictionary on-line ([www.rae.es](http://www.rae.es)), the Academy has created a huge corpus of words for the study of the language. Everyday, thousands of web pages are downloaded automatically to increase the databases, partly available on-line. Companies like Microsoft and Telefónica have signed agreements with academic institutions to adapt software to the Spanish language or supported research to develop voice recognition systems.

In Argentina, host to the Third Conference ([www.congresodelalengua3.ar](http://www.congresodelalengua3.ar)), the future is beginning to be regarded with optimism. The Argentine economy should soon recover from its recent rough patch and the country should start contributing to extend the geography of the Spanish language thanks to its excellent human capital. Its incipient relations with China are promising. The Americas are a springboard for an Asian dimension that has so far eluded the Spanish language.

Along with political leaders and language experts, some of the most outstanding authors of the day met in Rosario this year. Neither the late Octavio Paz nor Gabriel García Márquez, who both opened the 1997 Zacatecas conference, were present; nor was Camilo José Cela,

who did the same in Valladolid in 2001 and died soon after. But there was another Nobel Prize laureate in Argentina, the Portuguese novelist José Saramago.

A Portuguese writer in the Spanish club? Saramago's presence in Rosario was a tribute to his friend the Argentine author Ernesto Sábato and a celebration of understanding between Latin-Americans. Brazil and Portugal are founder members of the Ibero-American summits, another forum for European and Latin American relations. Argentina has a strategic economic relationship with Brazil, the South American giant that radiates Portugal's language and culture to the rest of America while at the same time absorbing those of its Hispanic neighbours.

The Conference's motto was 'linguistic identity and globalization'. The President of the *Academia Argentina de Letras*, Pedro Luis Barcia, said that the debates would focus on two objectives: to adapt the Spanish language to global change, but without forgoing its communicational unity, and to respect 'aboriginal substrata' and the Hispanic world's varied literary languages (see *El País*, 14/XI/2004).

President Kirchner declared that the task of the Conference's organizers was to foster awareness of the 'essential unity' of the language among governments and civil societies. Language unity is indeed a strategic challenge for the 22 Academies of the Spanish language ([www.asale.org](http://www.asale.org)) which are working together on the three 'basic codes for the unity of the language' (according to Guillermo Rojo, Secretary to the Spanish Academy, see *ABC*, 17/XI/2004): dictionary, grammar and spelling. One of the main concerns is to unify the translation of foreign words (mainly from English) in the different countries.

After achieving an agreement between the Academies, a new Grammar of the Spanish Language, started in 1998, should be ready by 2006. The *Diccionario Panhispánico de Dudas*, a book that aims to provide standard answers to Spanish language usage queries, was presented in Rosario and will be issued early in 2005, while a *Diccionario de Americanismos* is expected to be completed by 2008. The latest revision of the Royal Academy's spelling rules was published in 1999, after consultation with all the other Academies.

Unity does not mean purity. *Mestizaje* or cross-fertilisation was vindicated by King Juan Carlos in his inaugural speech as the driving force that makes the language evolve and expand: 'all languages are hybrids and Castilian, a hybrid from the very beginning, became Spanish precisely through growth from crossbreeding... first in the Peninsula and then, decisively, when it developed in America'.

Another key word this year was *plural*. Spanish speakers wish to see themselves as a 'linguistic community' with ample room for a variety of languages and cultures (only one scholar, Gregorio Salvador of the Royal Academy, advocated abandoning minority languages in the interest of a solid, powerful language, spoken by as many people as possible). And, in case the Conference failed to sufficiently acknowledge the diversity of the Spanish world, a parallel *Conference of the Languages*, whose chairman was Nobel Peace Prize laureate Alfredo Pérez Esquivel, was held to discuss Amerindian languages and Spain's other languages, including Basque, Catalan and Galician. However, the conference's working language was... Spanish ([www.laslenguas.org.ar](http://www.laslenguas.org.ar)).

As Brown University Professor Julio Ortega put it, Spanish is what Quechua and Catalan, Nahuatl and Galician have in common. ‘The news I bring is that Spanish is not in danger. Rather, it is protected, from the inside, by regional languages, by native languages, by mixed frontier speech’ (*El País*, 20/11/2004). In fact, the rival conference was not intended to be against the Spanish language, but against poverty and social exclusion: ‘Rosario cannot afford such an expensive event’ said one of the organizers.

The Conference was also an occasion to launch the IV Centenary of the first edition of *Don Quijote* in 2005, deemed by many to be the first modern novel and the foremost icon of Hispanic culture ([www.donquijotedelamancha2005.com](http://www.donquijotedelamancha2005.com), [www.cervantesvirtual.com/IVCentenario](http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/IVCentenario)). However, commemorations will certainly not be over for another hundred years. In 2015, the centenary of the second part of *Don Quijote* will provide another opportunity to celebrate the contribution of the Spanish language to universal literature. But in the meantime, Spanish speakers will meet again for the Fourth International Conference of the Spanish Language, scheduled to be held in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, in 2007.

**Conclusion:** Twelve years after Seville’s 1992 Expo, the Spanish language has magnificent prospects, but also certain weaknesses. Spanish-speaking countries as a whole are in a medium-to-high position on the Human Development Index (income + life expectancy + educational level), but are still afflicted by serious social inequalities and institutional obstacles to progress. In many Spanish-speaking countries, the awareness of the international weight of the language is on the increase, as is the concern for making the struggle to improve educational levels and social integration compatible with respect for minority cultures. The Spanish language is becoming a world commodity, but its presence on the Internet is far from being proportional to its demographic weight. Although there are many outstanding Spanish-language writers and thinkers, Spanish has yet to prove that it can be a language for science and innovation.

The expansion of Spanish depends on the capacity of its speakers to catch up with globalization. The success of the language is not a goal in itself, but is certainly something more than a mere sign of the well-being achieved by its speakers. It can also be a tool for progress.