

SPANISH LANGUAGE INFLUENCES ON WRITTEN ENGLISH

It is difficult to isolate what appear to be characteristic errors made by Spanish-speaking students in our urban schools when they are writing English; their writings are palimpsests through which the effects of many influences may be glimpsed. Among these influences may be the kind of Spanish spoken in their homes and neighborhoods; the kind of English spoken in their homes and neighborhoods either by Spanish-speaking people or by members of other ethnic groups with their own characteristic adaptations of standard English; and early conceptions, or misconceptions, as to how to write English. It is perfectly possible that sometimes a writing error which might have been caused by Spanish interference may also be shared, and hence reinforced, by the usage of other ethnic groups. In the last analysis, it is not possible to claim that any particular error in writing can be better understood by exclusively applying knowledge of the Spanish language, but it is one perspective, among others, which may help.

To increase the difficulty of the problem, the Spanish-speaking students in the City College population have such a wide variety of experience with both Spanish and English that perhaps we have no one kind of student we can call typical. First, the students or their parents have come from places ranging from Puerto Rico and Cuba to Ecuador and Chile, so that the Spanish itself, and the way it is spoken, varies. More importantly, the amount of Spanish that students know varies tremendously. On the one hand we have a few Spanish-speaking students, lately arrived in the United States, who know the Spanish grammar well and who speak formal Spanish fluently. At the other extreme are the students who have been born

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and reared here, whose first language nevertheless was Spanish, who still speak a kind of informal Spanish to their parents and friends, but who have no formal grammatical training in Spanish and who read the language minimally, in ads and newspapers. Between these two extremes we have students with every gradation of knowledge of Spanish.

Nevertheless, as those of us who have taught the writing of English to these students for several years know, there are certain kinds of errors which show up again and again in their papers, so that frequently we are able to say with accuracy, "This is the paper of a student from a Spanish-speaking background." Furthermore, the same kinds of errors, if not the same number, may turn up in the papers of both the New York-born and the Cuban-born student. For instance, a native New Yorker, in perfect control of spoken English, one day carelessly writes *virtually* for *virtually*, probably because *v* tends to be pronounced *b* in Spanish. Speaking from practical experience, it appears to us that *any* knowledge of the structure of Spanish, spoken as well as written, can result in the student's transferring certain conventions or constructions which are then perceived as "errors" in written English.

A student appreciates knowing, when he finds he is committing some error, that he is not an inferior learner, a failure at writing his own language, but that he has simply been analogizing—the most respectable of mental activities—in a situation where, rather exceptionally, to analogize produces error. In by far the greater number of situations, to draw analogies between the structures and usages of Spanish and English would result in acceptable writing. It is from the exceptional cases, when the structures of the two languages are not exactly analogous, that errors derive. Thus we must emphasize at the outset that in our view the writing problems we treat in this paper do not indicate a lack of intellectual development or learning potential on the part of Spanish-speaking students, but are instead a direct result of the students' use of analogy to deal with the often idiosyncratic nature of English syntax.

In this paper we present some of the errors often made by these students that appear to have origins in Spanish grammar, pronunciation, usage or spelling.¹

¹The list is by no means intended to be comprehensive; it is merely suggestive. The problems dealing with verbs, for instance, which might make a very long paper in themselves, are here only touched upon.

Some kinds of errors result in what at first glance appears to be a carelessly omitted word in English.²

The first I would do is to buy myself a beautiful house.

But who really is *the responsible* for people's education?

I don't understand why if *a young* is fifteen years old *has* to go from junior high school to high school without adequate preparation.

The reason a child may see and hear things more differently is because *has* no reason to see things otherwise.

Is not only the people itself.

But is a matter of fact that I am always trying to get more and more education for myself because I realized that *is* absolutely necessary.

In fact, all these errors are in all probability caused by Spanish interference. The first three errors may arise from the fact that in Spanish the combined article and adjective can be nominalized, or used in place of the English language's article, adjective and noun or pronoun, so that *the beautiful* in Spanish means *the beautiful one*, *the young* means *the young one*, and so on. The remaining five errors may be explained by the fact that in Spanish the subject pronoun may be omitted, because verb forms are differentiated so that the person and number of the pronoun are perfectly clear. The writers of the sentences have probably been translating too literally from Spanish into English.

Another omission common in the Spanish-speaking student's writing is the *n* on the indefinite article before a word beginning with a vowel sound. This refinement has no equivalent in Spanish and is hard for students to master.

The main point of the passage is to give you the idea of what college requires and to give you *a* idea of what the college student is *expect* to know.

The omission of the *ed* from the past tense and from the past participle, as in the example above, is difficult to attribute to a principle connected particularly with Spanish, especially as this omission is common to many non-Spanish-speaking students. But in the case of Spanish-speaking students there is a reinforcing principle, the fact that because the final *t* and *d* are very difficult to pronounce, they tend to be dropped in *spoken* English.

²All examples are from actual student papers.

It is a place *fill* with rats and filth lying everywhere, a place where one cannot walk the streets safely at night for fear of being *attack*.

Besides the errors caused by omission, there are certain common interference errors of addition.

The problem with the American students is that they don't worry about *the school*.

I hope and I pray that by 1980 *the education* and *the students* will be of a better class.

The main point of the passage is staten the problems that we are going to face in the future as the result of *the poor education*.

In Spanish the definite article is used, as above, before generalized and abstract nouns.

Another troublesome addition is the refinement of making the adjective agree in number with its noun, according to Spanish usage:

In *publics schools*, as far as I can see, seems like nobody cares about the students. (In this case, the *s* on *public* was carefully added by the student after proofreading.)

In the *differents colleges* they can learn other lenguajes but in the High Schools or *elementals schools*, they learn one lenguaje and the recieve a low idea about another lenguajes.

It is because I want to know some *personals things* of that person.

Maybe it changes because the *generations* are *differents*.

The double negative is permissible in Spanish, so that an extra negative may frequently be added to an English sentence by a Spanish-speaking student. In Spanish, a statement is first negated by the insertion of a *no* before the verb; then the subject and adverbs are changed to negatives wherever possible.

She didn't do *nothing* about *nothing*.

I feel that now children are *not* learning absolutely *nothing* for schools.

In some cases the Spanish-speaking student is confused when there is a distinction made in English which is not present in Spanish. For instance, in Spanish the relative pronoun *que* may mean *that*, *which*, *what*, *who* or *whom*. Accordingly, the Spanish-speaking student frequently fails to distinguish between *which*, referring to objects, and *who*, referring to people. *Which* is, for some reason, the preferred form.

Probably, comparing a student from another country, *which* has only

gotten to eight grade has a better knowledge academically than a High School graduated student from the U.S.
In this college we find many different people *which* have many different ideas.

Another such error may be caused by the fact that *mucho* in Spanish is the equivalent of both *much* and *many* in English.

The married woman has *much* financial troubles.

The comparison of adjectives, too, appears to differ enough in the two languages to cause problems. In Spanish the most common method of comparison is to use the adverb *más* for both *more* and *most*. The Spanish-speaking student may accordingly have difficulty in handling the distinction between comparative and superlative. *Worse* and *worst* seem most frequently to be confused.

I had receive a good education better than many people that are around me and *worst* than many around me.

Another kind of error is caused by the fact that while two grammatical forms may both exist in both languages, the frequency with which each is used may vary. Such a situation prevails in the case of the infinitive and the gerund. In English, verbs may take as a complement either the infinitive or the gerund; in Spanish, almost all verbs must take the infinitive. The Spanish speaker will therefore tend to use the infinitive where in English the gerund is the correct form.

Apollo tricks Mario *to believe* that he is his girlfriend.

I have always dreamed *to live*.

The selfishness of both generations *to understand* each other is worsening every day.

There must be an immediate change of these techniques to be able to prepare the individuals for a productive service to society, since people increasingly become more interested *to participate* in the complicated activities of their communities.

Another common problem with infinitives is that sometimes, either in Spanish or in English, the *to* of the infinitive may be omitted, while it is required in the translation.

What we must *to do* is get a better education. (must = tengo que)

Literal translation of idiom is probably the most fruitful source of awkwardness and error, and is interfused with the problem of literal translation of prepositions.

If you want your child to grow *in a right way*, give him a better community housing environment. (in a right way = de un modo recto)

All the while the heads of these countries in the Middle East are at war, the people who was not willing to die and want peace are the ones who are fighting. (all the while = mientras tanto)

The years are *getting on him*. (los años le estan encima)

I *made* no notice. (no le hice caso)

I *made* a line. (yo hice fila)

If all English teachers were like Mr. Pedullo, English would be enjoyed by students, and teachers wouldn't have to *worry of* students cutting class. (worry = preocuparse de)

Concerning to the education in the U.S., I don't see any advance. (concerning to = en lo concerniente a, respecto a, tocante a)

I went dancing *to the Caguas Highway Inn*. (al Caguas Highway Inn could translate as *at or to*)

He got *married with* his wife in 1969. (married with = casarse con)

Spelling problems are sometimes apparently connected to pronunciation problems, and sometimes seem to arise because the student is familiar with the somewhat different spelling of an equivalent Spanish word. It may also be that even when the Spanish-speaking student is not very familiar with Spanish spelling, he may try to make English words conform to the Spanish norm of one vowel and one consonant per syllable.

The fact that Spanish-speaking students are inclined to pronounce the letter *i* in English as \bar{i} (so that *sit* becomes $s\bar{i}t$) seems to cause two different kinds of spelling errors. Perhaps assuming that the English letter *i* is pronounced like the Spanish \bar{i} , the student uses *i* to spell the sound \bar{i} .

Nixon has proven himself irresponsible and *deciving* to America and the world.

One must *perceive* things as an adult.

Some teachers don't put much attention to their students so that it makes them *fill* like getting out of school and finding a job.

A complementary error may occur because the speaker has been mispronouncing the word, and now substitutes a written word that he spells as he is pronouncing.

Is very simple to state that to *leave* in this world we must have some education.

His interest, his culture, everything, even his language made him feel out of place when he has to *seat* down in a classroom where they are speaking a foreign language to him.

Consonants are rarely if ever doubled in Spanish, and often a doubled consonant in English is the major difference between two closely related words; in this case, the student tends to drop a consonant. Even when there is no closely equivalent Spanish word, the student may tend to change a doubled to a single consonant.

The needs of writing and reading skills of a high order will be more *necessary*. (necesario)

I have received a fragmented "education" which . . . taught me a lot of "knowledges" about *diferent* thing, without educating me. (diferente)

The English language is taught in a very poor *maner*. (manera)

It requires all what this society needs, that is: more interaction, understanding, and *comunicacion* of old and new ideas. (comunicación)

After the student becomes aware that a word has a doubled consonant, he frequently seems to double the wrong consonant:

But is a matter of fact that I am always trying to get more and more education for myself because I realized that is absolutely *neccesary*.

I consider for me specially is kind of hard because of the language, but not *imppossible*.

The kind of education we receive is bad enough to destroy people from the *beggining*.

Spanish-speaking students frequently seem to misspell an English word to make it accord more closely with a Spanish equivalent or with Spanish phonetic principles.

I think that the *apaty* of teachers, students and parents as well are contributing to the failure of the Educational *sistem*. (apatía, sistema)

I don't understand why if a young is fifteen years old has to go from junior high school without *adecuate* preparation (adecuado)

I was prepare to live in a *diferent* country whit *diferent* language and *tradicions*. (diferente, tradición)

Although the words *when* and *went*, *want* and *what*, are confused by other writers than Spanish-speakers, they are so frequently confused by Spanish-speaking students that once again mispronunciation seems to be part of the cause of confusion. Spanish-speaking students may avoid pronouncing *h*, and if the Spanish speaker pronounces neither the *h* in *when* or the difficult final *t* in *went*, the confusion between the two words becomes understandable. *Want*, too, pronounced without the *t*, becomes similar to *what*, pronounced without either *h* or *t*.

These people and this place have been the best education for me
because they have taught me *want* it is to be without one.
I *what* people to see me as all big and all powerful.
I *when* dancing.

Finally, while it is fairly easy to identify the errors the Spanish-speaking student commits in writing English, it is less obvious that there are some English constructions which typically have no parallels in Spanish, and which he may avoid using. His grasp of these unfamiliar structures, then, may be to some extent a measure of his proficiency in writing English.

One of the tests for such a student is the proper use of the possessive with the apostrophe and *s*. In Spanish the possessive is indicated by the alternative form: *the shoe of the girl*, rather than *the girl's shoe*. The Spanish-speaking student may still favor the equivalent form.

Meanwhile, the uncle of the boy was rushing everywhere looking for him.

Somehow in the fight the dog managed to injure the tongue of the cat.

Another such test, also involving the unfamiliar apostrophe, is the verbal contraction, for which there is no parallel in Spanish. The contraction may either be omitted, or improperly spelled.

Many students are at fault in that they *do not* recognize the importance of education.

It is very diferent living in a country *that is not* similar to the one you were born and race.

I will have to try and work hard to learn how to read, understand and write in English.

I could'nt say that since I'm a foreigner, my troubles are the fault of others.

In Spanish, the indirect object is always indicated by the preposition *to*. A Spanish-speaking writer, then, might write *Give the ball to the child*, instead of *Give the child the ball*.

Only the teacher can give the knowledge to the student.

Clauses are far more frequently required in Spanish³ than in English. There are many instances in English where a prepositional phrase would be stylistically preferable to a relative clause, but this would not necessarily be so in Spanish. As in the case of the indirect object, then, use of the form preferred in English would be a sign of the

writer's proficiency. The Spanish speaker might write *the baby that has the cold* rather than *the baby with the cold*.

When I was almost graduated from high school I was more like a student that was in the eight grade.

Clauses are also used in Spanish after such verbs as *want*, *expect*, *ask* and *tell*, where we would tend to use a verbal complement. *I wanted her to dance* would be, in Spanish, *I wanted that she would dance*. *He asked me to hurry* would become *He asked that I would hurry*.

My professor expected that I would not pass the test.

In sum, the writing of a Spanish-speaking student may sometimes seem heavy with clauses and with *thats*.

Today's world is such that we have to put into practice whatever that we have learned.

Another problem for Spanish-speaking students may arise because the Spanish language does not use the verb *to do* to form the intensive as the English does (*I do see*, *I did see*). It is accordingly sometimes difficult for the Spanish speaker to frame a question properly in English.

You understand this problem?

Because the gerund is less frequent in Spanish than in English, it is a mark of sophistication for the Spanish speaker to use it, as in *seeing is believing*, even though *to see is to believe* is not incorrect.

To read and to write, are these skills of a high order?

Adverbs in Spanish are more frequently used with the preposition than with the inflected ending, *mente*. Thus Spanish speakers might prefer to say *he runs with grace*, rather than *he runs gracefully*.

My math teacher puts his point across with skill.

In English, however, the inflected ending is more frequently used.

It is valuable to both teacher and student to recognize why a student writes as he does, and why he commits certain characteristic errors. When the teacher perceives that the student is not committing errors out of ignorant willfulness or willful ignorance, he will begin to show a necessary respect for and interest in where the student has been and what he has been learning before his arrival in his present class. There is, we think, a kind of logic behind almost

any writing error. A good writing teacher should try to understand the logic that the student is using, whether it is properly applied or misapplied; if misapplied, the teacher should point out the alternative system and explain that one is standard in English, and one is not. It may make a great deal of difference to a student to know that he has not been dumb, but that he has simply been using one system of logic where another is called for. Remediation cannot be accomplished by the teacher's simply laying the learning on the student; the exploration should be mutual.