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In Pursuit of the Elusive "Universal" Spanish

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Imagine, if you will, a group of Spanish students, natives and non-natives, gathered around their professor in excited conversation. A nearby businessman, hearing them speaking in Spanish interrupts:

"Hey, do you guys speak Spanish?"

"Sí, como no." "Por supuesto." "Ya lo creo."

"Great! Listen, I'm going to be taking a trip through Latin America next month and I want to buy some special gifts for my family. I want to buy a purse for my wife, earrings for my daughter, and a light jacket for my son. So, first of all, how do you say purse?"

First native speaker: "Well, you call a purse a cartera."

Second native speaker: "No, a purse is a bolsa."

Third native speaker: "You have the gender wrong on that. It's not a bolsa; it's a bolso."

"Oh, I see. And if I want to buy some earrings for my daughter, how do I ask for earrings?"

First native speaker: "Earrings are aros."

Second native speaker: "No, you can call them either aretes or pendientes."

Third native speaker: "No, in my country they are called caravanas, although I have heard some of my friends say zarcillos."

"You guys are really helpful. For my teenage son I would like to buy a light jacket. Not a heavy coat, mind you, just a light jacket. How would you say that?"

First native speaker: "In my country that would be a chamarra."

Second native speaker: "Well actually, if it's just a light jacket, you would say campera."

Third native speaker: "I've always said chumpa, but my Colombian friend says chompa."

Returned missionary: "All of you guys are wrong. The best word is chaqueta."

"Maybe I will buy something else for my family. Could you just help me a little with some food. I really like grapefruit juice. How do I order grapefruit juice for breakfast?"
Half of the native speakers: "You just say jugo de toronja."

Other half of the native speakers: "No, in our countries you say exprimido de pomelo."

"Oh, I see. And if I want to order something special for dessert, say cake. How do I order a piece of cake in a restaurant?"

First native speaker, hesitating: "Well, I know how we say it in our country, but how do you say it in your country?"

"We say torta. But I know that in your country torta is not cake at all, but a sandwich that is made on a special roll..."

At this point, the college professor interjects himself into the conversation: "Really, the only thing you can do is to take a piece of paper and write down what the correct word is in each of the countries you visit. If you want to order cake you will have to choose from: pastel, torta, ponqué, queque, etc."

"Thanks again, guys, you've been a great help."

The above conversation illustrates the problems of trying to translate into the Spanish language, a truly rich and varied language which is spoken in more than 20 countries worldwide. This is the challenge that faces the Spanish Translation Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as it attempts to prepare materials that will be acceptable in all of these different countries.

Overall, Spanish is a fairly unified language, considering the many countries in which it is spoken. This basic unity is manifest in Spanish grammar, particularly the verb system. In matters of grammar, the Academia Española, or the Spanish Academy of Letters, sets the rules, and all Spanish-speaking countries generally accept and follow these established rules. With minor exceptions, the verb system is constant throughout the Spanish-speaking world. A limited number of verbs have regionalistic meanings which make them invalid in certain areas, but the list is indeed short. However, when we come to nouns, particularly the names of the most common nouns—nouns describing food, clothing and the common and ordinary items of everyday life—we really run into trouble. Here we find marked regional differences, many of them due to historical and geographical separation, others derived from Indian influences.

Within the LDS Church, we confront additional problems: First, the influence of thousands of English dominant missionaries who have been preaching the gospel in Spanish-speaking countries over the past fifty to sixty years. They have added a definite anglicized religious vocabulary to the Spanish spoken by the members of our Church. Secondly, for us there exists an interesting and challenging vocabulary unique to Mormon culture.

How then does one solve the problem of translating terms like "purse," "earrings," "light jacket," "cake," "beans," "shoelaces," etc.? There
are several ways of approaching this problem, a few of which I will outline briefly here. One of the first is to say, "We will do it the Castilian way—after all Castilian is the only correct Spanish anyway." While some would argue in favor of such an assertion, it is certainly not the approach that has been taken by the great writers of Latin America. Furthermore, a very important consideration for us as a translation organization is: Who is our audience? How do we meet their needs? Ninety-five percent of our audience is Spanish American. If we were to translate in a purely Castillian Spanish, we would confuse a great many in our audience and do them a disservice.

A second approach to the problem would be to do it "my way"—that is, each writer or translator would use his own regionalistic idiom. Indeed, some authors do take the attitude "let the readers make do the best they can." Others, for reasons of literary fidelity, choose to reflect the local flavor and color of the speech of their region. However, a prime goal of our organization is to translate in the most universal and acceptable Spanish possible; therefore, we must discard this approach.

A very professional approach to the problem is that taken by the Reader's Digest Organization. They actually have two separate translation centers for the Spanish-speaking world. One of these is located in Mexico while the other is located in Spain. They are totally independent units, translating for their respective audiences as they see fit. In addition to this accommodation Selecciones in Mexico City occasionally regionalizes an article that presents specific problems, for example, articles dealing with food. A different translation, which reflects regional vocabulary, is prepared for Mexico and Central America, another for the Andean region, while still another is prepared for the southern countries of South America. This reflects a conscientious effort to regionalize the article so that it is acceptable to all readers. The solution is a very good one; however, it is an expensive solution and not one that is practical for our Church. Reader's Digest is a profit-making company, and it sells its magazines at a price which will provide a profit. If special accommodations have to be made in order to regionalize the vocabulary of a given quantity of articles each year, then that is built into the price structure of the magazine. Books and magazines produced by our Church are not designed to produce a profit when they are sold; in fact, nearly all of these publications are subsidized in one form or another so that the Spanish-language magazine or a typical Sunday School manual will be as inexpensive as possible.

What steps have been taken, then, by the LDS Church in order to produce its literature in the elusive "universally acceptable" Spanish? As the need for translation grew in various languages, translation offices were set up in the various missions of the LDS Church. French translations were made in France; Japanese translations were made in Japan, and Spanish translations were made in the headquarters of each individual Spanish mission. As the number of items translated increased and an annual curriculum was authorized in Spanish, two separate translation offices were established to meet the needs of the Spanish-speaking members of the Church. One of these was
centered in Salt Lake City, with the responsibility for Church correspondence, leadership materials, and other special assignments. However, the curriculum items of the Church were translated in Mexico, which was the Spanish-speaking country with the largest number of members.

This translation office did yeoman work, producing manuals for the various organizations of the Church, such as the Primary, the Young Men and Young Women organizations, the Relief Society and the Sunday School. As might be expected, the translations reflected the language spoken by the Mexican translators employed at that office. A typical example is that of chalk: chalk was translated regularly as "gis," a regionalistic term that was strange and consequently unacceptable to the majority of members living in other Hispanic countries. With increased growth of the Church in these countries, many complaints reached Church Headquarters saying that the curriculum manuals of the Church were too regionalistic, and that the regionalisms detracted from the content of these important books.

But, if you don't translate in Mexico, where do you translate? In Spain? In Colombia? In Argentina? Wouldn't the same complaints be made no matter where the Church curriculum items were translated? After much study and evaluation, it was decided to set up a single translation office in Salt Lake City that would employ translators from throughout the Spanish-speaking world with the commission to translate Church materials in an idiom that would be acceptable to all Spanish-speaking members, no matter where they lived. Whereas it might be impossible to translate into an elusive and non-existent universal Spanish, at least an honest effort could be made to translate all items into a neutral Spanish—that is, a Spanish that would be acceptable to all and yet would not reflect the specific regionalisms characteristic of any given country.

A very common occurrence in our department today is to hear a translator or a reviewer from one country go to another's door and ask: "How do you say this in your country?" Or, "If I say such and such, will the Mexicans understand it, or will the Argentines understand it?" Gradually our people have become conditioned to the point that they know the majority of the terms and constructions that are overly regionalistic, and they try to avoid these. When there is a doubt, a quick consultation with a translator from another area helps resolve the problem. Every Monday morning we have a staff meeting in which troublesome items that might be too regionalistic or too anglicized are discussed and resolved. Every effort is made to see that translations made by a Central American or Mexican are reviewed by someone from South America and vice-versa. Through this effort we are striving to achieve an acceptable level of neutrality.

When we encounter an item that has several different equivalents in Spanish, we look for the most universal or most basic of the various terms. A simple example is the word "chalk," referred to above. Although there are various regionalistic terms, everybody does understand the meaning of the term tiza; therefore, that is the term that we use. More problematical to translate are the words
"shoestring" and "cake," also referred to earlier. For cake we say pastel; although this term is not universally acceptable, it is the one that fits the needs of the majority of countries and is at least understood as a dessert in the rest.

There are other problems that are not as easy to resolve, particularly when we deal with foods and vegetables. In some cases we have no choice but to use two or more words separated by a slash. For example, if we are translating the word "beans," we feel it necessary to use frijoles for northern Spanish America, porotos for southern Spanish America, and either aluvias or judias for Spain. Sometimes the options are not clear cut, and it can nearly drive us crazy and cause us to lose a great deal of time dealing with these supposedly easy words. What, for example, is the best translation for light bulb? Would you use foco, bombilla, bombillo, ampolla, bombita, lamparilla, lamparita or some other term?

Perhaps the most difficult problem of all is that special terminology used within the LDS Church. A noted professor of linguistics confessed to me that he had to learn a whole new vocabulary when he became a convert to the LDS Church. In some cases we use unique terms; in others we place a distinct meaning upon a common term. Also, certain expressions which are commonplace in English, and which are very popular in LDS circles, may be quite difficult to render in other languages. Let's look at a few examples. A favorite word in leadership circles in and out of the Church is the word challenge. LDS missionaries and Church leaders are constantly bombarded with the need to challenge their investigators or membership to work toward a specific goal. The dictionary tells us that challenge is translated as desafiar or desafio; consequently, that is the word LDS people use.

The problem here is that the word challenge in Spanish maintains much of its basic medieval meaning—that of challenging a person's opinion, or challenging him to a duel. The word is much stronger in Spanish than it is in English and hence is inappropriate in many circumstances for either missionary work or leadership materials. A softer expression which may be used in the noun form but not as a verb is the word cometido. However, it falls short of achieving the same meaning as the English word "challenge". Therefore, in Spanish we have a word on one side that is too abrupt, yet the alternative is too soft; it does not carry all of the ramifications of the expression in English, and we are left with an interesting "challenge."

Another popular English word today in leadership circles is the term "follow up," as in "if you want the task performed correctly, you have to have proper follow up." Any Spanish equivalents for this term rather miss the mark. A few years ago I was in attendance in a district presidency-high council meeting in Puebla, Mexico. One of the officials was reading some instructions from a recent Church publication. He mentioned a term prosecución, with which I was unfamiliar, so I interrupted to ask the meaning of this expression. Not one person present understood the term prosecución as it was used in the manual. I looked at the paragraph and reconstructed it in English in my mind and came to the conclusion that it had to be a translation of our ever-popular phrase "follow up." To this day we
have not found a more adequate translation for "follow up", and every time we use the term prosecución, we wonder how many thousand members will not understand what it means.

Let's turn to an example of a term that has been highly influenced by the English. Suppose that you have just been named the Director for Physical Facilities in Lima, Peru. You are being introduced to the president of one of the largest construction firms in Lima. Your fellow employee, corrupted through a long association with English-speaking missionaries and officials of the Church from Salt Lake City, who speak but little Spanish, introduces you as the Director de Facilidades Físicas. You immediately perceive the blank look or lack of comprehension on the face of your host, who is either confused or intrigued concerning the nature of your responsibilities. Director de Facilidades Físicas is a literal translation of the English term; however, it does not convey in any way the same meaning in Spanish as it does in English. The term which we currently use is Director de Bienes Muebles e Inmuebles, an adequate term, but one which sounds strange and totally unfamiliar to English dominant missionaries and officials from Salt Lake City, who, therefore, do not use it.

Another very specific problem we have wrestled with has been an adequate interpretation of the term "divorce clearance." This is an expression that has a specialized meaning in LDS circles. When translating this term into a foreign language, it becomes very difficult to maintain all of the ramifications understood in English. Our eventual solution to that problem was a rather literal translation, followed by a lengthy footnote which gives an explanation of all that is involved in this particular process.

Though we have not solved all of the problems associated with producing adequate translations which will be accepted in all areas of the Spanish-speaking world, we do feel that we have made significant progress and that our method is valid. Through a system of checks and balances which involves consultations, reviews by translators from a different part of the Spanish-speaking world than the original translator, increased familiarity with basic problem words, a glossary of special LDS terminology, and a constant listening ear open to the suggestions and complaints of faithful Spanish-speaking members of the Church throughout the world, we are endeavoring to capture and cage that elusive animal--universal or neutral Spanish.