



SPEAKING SPANISH

It's worth the effort... Getting by... Greetings and Salutations... Formalities and Titles... Handsignals... Gringo... Nicknames... How to write a letter... Slang: watch your mouth!... Mexican media: books, newspapers, magazines, comics, radio, t.v., movies...



If communication were nothing more than learning the language, things would be greatly simplified; we could all unearth high school Spanish texts and start parroting phrases. The fact that this doesn't work is demonstrated by the number of people who go to Mexico right out of a formal Spanish course and find themselves faced with that frustrating stare that says so eloquently, "What the hell are you trying to tell me?"

The problem of studied efforts to communicate is well illustrated by the experience of some friends. When they went to Mexico, the woman had a degree in Spanish from a large university and her boyfriend knew several obscenities and no grammar—good whorehouse Spanish. Within two weeks she felt her nerves straining every time she was forced to speak Spanish, caught between the rigid grammatical training of school and the sloppy everyday speech of the people. He was right in there, waving arms, laughing, gesticulating over this and that, throwing in an occasional inappropriate obscenity and generally making himself understood and liked.

Before you toss your Spanish book out the window, remember that personality and attitude can communicate general ideas and moods quite well, but vocabulary, and to a lesser extent grammar, are necessary for explicit information. You can laugh and stand on your head, but if you want a prophylactic, you'll prefer to know the word rather than having to rely on sign language and demonstrations.

Fear of looking stupid chokes up many people. It is very unsettling for adults to be unable to communicate on what they feel is an intelligent and dignified level. No wonder the college graduate feels defensive when forced to say, "Want eat!" in order to



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 Published by John Muir Publications
 P.O. Box 613
 Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501

find a restaurant. Swallow your pride and start talking; it's the only way you'll overcome the problem. I have never felt that remaining silent was preferable to a fumbling but honest attempt to communicate.

A friend told us that he'd spent several months in Mexico without bothering to learn more than a few words of Spanish. "For example," he said, "all I ever said in gas stations was '*cielo*' and they filled the tank right up." It wasn't until he told us this story that anyone had bothered to inform him that *cielo* means heaven and *lleno* full.

When your efforts to speak Spanish draw a blank, the most common reaction you'll get will be a polite, "*¿Mande?*" or a more blunt, "*¿Qué?*" (What?). At first, you might feel that some people are deliberately misunderstanding you because it seems that "*¿Qué?*" is heard far too often. If you listen to English conversation, however, you'll notice that "What?", "Huh?" and "What did you say?" are also used far too often and often without reason.

Should this happen, either try another word or phrase or repeat your first statement slowly, clearly and in a normal tone of voice. Don't fall back on English words, especially English words shouted at the top of your lungs. Do you think that a Spanish word would be more understandable to you at full volume, repeated several times in quick succession? It is not polite or reasonable to get mad just because you can't make yourself understood.

Although a broad vocabulary that includes everyday words will be your most valuable asset to communication, don't stop there. An amazing and disturbing number of tourists and foreign residents never make the effort to learn grammar and forms of speech that would make them fluent in Spanish. By improving your knowledge of the language, you'll also improve your understanding of the people and their customs. (See *Appendices: Schools.*)

The Mexicans, surprisingly enough, are perhaps the greatest obstacle to overcome when learning Spanish. They are so helpful and understanding that they seem able to anticipate whatever word or phrase you've so diligently practiced and you often don't get a chance to say it. Imagine the scene as a middle-aged couple approaches their first test. "Now, Leonard," the wife asks, "are you sure you've got it down?"

"Yes, dear," Leonard sighs, wiping sweaty palms on his trouser legs. "I've gone over it at least a hundred times." Leonard sighs again. There seems no way to avoid this confrontation; it's either speak Spanish or run out of gas.

"Well, once more just to be sure," his wife insists, opening the insurance company phrase book they picked up at the border. "Go ahead, Leonard, you've got to practice."

"*Buenas tardes*," Leonard begins, brows knit with superhuman effort. "*Llene el tanque de gasolina. Vea el aceite. ¿Cuánto es? ¡Gracias!*"

"Perfect!" his wife says, closing the book as they enter the gas station.

The attendant approaches the car briskly, not noticing Leonard's white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel. Leonard turns to the smiling face, his tongue suddenly blocking his throat as he croaks hesitantly, "*¿Llene...?*" Without a moment's hesitation, the attendant nods and is gone.

Leonard looks at his wife for help; the pump is in operation, the hood of the car up and air hisses into a rear tire. Wordlessly the attendant returns and indicates the level of oil on the dipstick. Leonard smiles weakly, but before he can ask, a small slip of paper is under his nose: 174 pesos.

As they're pulling back onto the highway, Leonard stretches his legs and says happily, "Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

This type of experience is very common; many tourists are amazed at just how easy it is to get by on the most rudimentary knowledge of the language, especially if they never leave the tourist circuit. When the first feelings of anxiety have passed, you'll find yourself feeling more self-confident and less likely to avoid personal contact with the people around you.

Keep in mind that some people can't understand what you say even when you know without a doubt that it was correct. Anyone who hasn't heard their own language spoken by a foreigner may find it difficult to follow what has been said. Others are hard of hearing or just dumb.

In many cases, particularly in remote areas of Mexico, the average person might not speak much Spanish. Indian languages are very common and you'll find yourself in the rather odd position of speaking better Spanish than the Mexicans. Sign language is important in this type of situation.

While wandering through an isolated village on the west coast of Mexico, we were approached by an old man who asked if we would sell him clothing.

"We're tourists," we answered, having often been mistaken for travelling vendors in areas where strangers were rare.

"Ah!" the old man exclaimed. "Then you must be Americans! I knew an American here several years ago. He came here to talk with us, to learn our customs."

"Was he an anthropologist?" I asked politely.

"*Quién sabe? Señor*," the old man chuckled. "He said that he wanted to learn all about us, but first he would go to the hills," and he motioned with a wrinkled hand toward a distant range of forbidding mountains, "to learn the language."

"What happened then?" Steve asked. From the seriousness with which the old man had looked toward the mountains, we felt certain that the American had encountered something unexpected.

"He came back here after six months and tried to talk to us. He tried for a long time, but he finally left."

"Why?" I asked. "Was there trouble?"

The old man looked at us with a toothless grin, then chuckled. "No, of course not. He left because none of us here are Indians. We couldn't understand a word of what he said. Only the people over there," and he waved again toward the mountains, "could talk to him."

GREETINGS AND SALUTATIONS

By American standards, Mexicans can be almost tediously polite. Friends who haven't seen each other for five minutes exchange several greetings, countergreetings, handshakes and assorted pleasantries.

The tourist often wonders if his Mexican acquaintance isn't putting him on with the apparent intensity of his feeling at each casual meeting. "¡Qué milagro!" (What a miracle!) the Mexican cries, though they had met just as usual in their regular *canima*. With a warm handshake he inquires after his friend's family and health, though he'd done exactly the same for day after day.

Although these pleasantries may seem superficial or unnecessary, their importance cannot be discounted. To a Mexican these formalities all add up to an American "Hi!" and their absence is as noticeable as a cold silent stare.

Effusive greetings between strangers are common and there's hardly any Mexican so impassive that he won't instinctively respond to a polite expression.

Don't worry about such common errors as saying, "Good afternoon" instead of "Good morning" (*Buenas tardes* vs. *Buenos días*). No one expects you to speak Spanish perfectly, but they do expect to hear something, even if it's incorrect. A mistake is much better than a nervous or impolite silence.

The word *adiós* is a handy greeting to learn as it covers many situations. Though *adiós* does mean "goodbye," it is also used extensively to mean "hello." Because it does not convey any sense of time, as does, "Good day" or "Good afternoon," *adiós* is always correct when used as a greeting, as long as you're passing someone and not greeting them with the intention of stopping to talk with them. If you intend to stop, you should use one of the regular greetings such as *Buenos días*.

If you're greeting someone and don't know the time of day, you can just say *Buenas* and leave off the last word of the expression.

The following expressions are commonly used as greetings:

¡Ola!	Hi!
¡Ola amigo!	Hi, friend!
¿Cómo está?	How are you? The usual response is <i>Muy bien, gracias</i> (Very well, thanks). Other responses: <i>Regular</i> or <i>Así, así</i> (So-so). Same as: <i>¿Cómo está?</i>
¿Qué tal?	How goes it? Response: <i>Muy bien, gracias</i> .
¿Cómo le va?	What's new? Response: <i>No mucho</i> (not much) or <i>Nada</i> (nothing).
¿Qué hay de nuevo?	
¿Qué milagro!	

The following words and polite expressions can cover a variety of situations, from meeting someone to stepping on their toes. Anyone interested in speaking with Mexicans should learn them as quickly as possible and use them liberally.

<i>Sí</i>	Yes.
<i>No</i>	No.
<i>O.K.</i>	Becoming quite common in many parts of Mexico.
<i>Por favor</i>	Please.
<i>Gracias</i>	Thanks. Response: <i>A usted</i> (You, too) or <i>Igualmente</i> (Equally).
<i>Está bien, Bien, Bueno</i>	Very well, O.K., good, etc.
<i>Muy bien</i>	Very well. To indicate approval. Someone offers you an item for sale and you accept by saying <i>Muy bien</i> .
<i>Dispénsame</i>	Excuse me.
<i>Perdón</i>	Pardon.
<i>Perdóneme</i>	Pardon me.
<i>Con permiso</i>	With permission.
<i>Andele</i>	Go ahead.
<i>¿Cómo no!</i>	Why not? Sure.
<i>Lo siento</i>	I'm sorry.
<i>No le hace</i>	Don't let it bother you.
<i>No importa</i>	It's nothing. Not important.
<i>Al contrario</i>	On the contrary.
<i>Pase adelante</i>	Come in.
<i>Pase</i>	Go ahead. Pass. Response: <i>Gracias</i> .
<i>Quiero presentarle a</i>	I want to introduce you to... (name).
(name)	
<i>Mucho gusto</i>	Pleased. A response to being introduced to someone.
<i>¡Nos vemos!</i>	We'll see you! Be seeing you!
<i>¡Qué le vaya bien!</i>	May you go well! This is a very common way to say goodbye to someone who you may not see for a while or if they're about to drive at night. The response is <i>Gracias</i> .
<i>Está en su casa</i>	You're in your house. An expression that many people unfamiliar with Mexicans take too literally. Make yourself at home is a more practical translation.
<i>¿Qué? ¿Mande?</i>	What? Mande is more polite than <i>Qué</i> , which may be used as <i>Hub?</i>
<i>¡Salud!</i>	Goodbait! Response: <i>Gracias</i> . Also used as a drinking toast, <i>Health!</i>

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