

Perspectives

On Standardizing the Spelling of Spanish

Standardization is a fundamental necessity in many areas of life. For instance, if you want to make a phone call, you depend on the fact that the same numbers that you press on one phone will work on any other phone. That's because all phone systems are standardized with respect to their dialing system.

Well, language works just like that where spelling is concerned. Each language has standardized ways for writing the sounds that we speak. Sometimes the system is complicated, as in English. Sometimes the system is relatively simple, as in Italian and Spanish.

It wasn't always that way, though. As Latin evolved into what we now call the Romance languages—Italian, French, Romanian, Portuguese, Spanish, etc.—those languages also evolved and produced variants. That's why, in Spanish, we have dialects such as Castilian, Aragonese, Catalan, Leonese, and so forth.

As time passed and these dialects became rooted in their particular geographical areas, variants began to appear within the forms used by people who wrote in those dialects. By the time the Catholic Monarchs— Fernando of Aragon and Isabella of Castile—conquered the Moors in 1492 and laid the bases for the political unification of Spain, these regional variations often complicated communication from one area to another.

Well, if you've got a problem, there's always a professor around to try to solve it. In Spain, that man was Antonio de Nebrija (1441-1522), a famous professor of Latin. Not only did Nebrija produce the first Latin-Spanish dictionary (1492) and the first Spanish-Latin dictionary (1495), but he wrote the very first grammar for a Romance language: the *Gramática de la lengua castellana* (Grammar of the Castilian Language). And he did this in 1492, the same year that Columbus discovered America. According to Nebrija, a principal function of this grammar would be as the companion of Empire—an image of greatness for the nation that Nebrija saw coming in the future.

Along with standardizing grammar, Nebrija also saw a need for standardizing spelling. In his opinion, “tenemos que escribir como pronunciamos, y pronunciar como escribimos” (we have to write as we pronounce, and pronounce as we write). In order to accomplish this, Nebrija said, “No debe haber letra que no tenga su distinto sonido, ni sonido que no tenga su distinta letra” (There shouldn't be a letter without a unique sound, nor a sound without its unique letter). In other words, Nebrija sought a spelling system in which each letter—or grapheme—would correspond to a specific sound—or phoneme.

Although this was Nebrija's ideal, he never introduced radical reforms in spelling. In good part, this was because conservatives in the field of language insisted that 1) it was imperative to respect the ties that Spanish had with Latin and Greek, and 2) it was essential to be loyal to “tradition.”

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With the advent of the eighteenth century, great emphasis was placed on reason, logic, and order. This put stress on

the Spanish system of spelling, because during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, there had been an increase in the number of inconsistencies and confusions that appeared in the language. In an effort to combat this problem, in 1714 the Spanish Royal Academy was founded. As expressed in its official motto, the aim of the Academy was to cleanse the language, fix it firmly in place, and give it splendor (“Limpia, fija y da esplendor”). In 1741, the Academy also published an *Ortografía* (guide to proper spelling). The rules for spelling that it listed were based on factors such as pronunciation, etymology, convention, and popular usage.

However, writers on all levels continued to make spelling mistakes. The most frequent problems had to do with letters that had the same sound in different contexts. Those letters were “g”/“j”, “c”/“s”/“z”, “b”/“v”, “ll”/“y”. Another factor was the frequent haphazard use of accent marks, capital letters, and punctuation marks.

Concern about these travesties was loudly voiced by the Mexican neoclassic author José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi (1776-1827) in his novel *El Periquillo Sarniento* (1816). In an age when education and culture were highly prized, Lizardi roundly criticized teachers whose ignorance of the language created a generation whose lack of knowledge was a blight on Mexico’s image. And the problem wasn’t limited to the commoners in Mexican society, but “se extiende a muchas personas de fina educación, de talentos no vulgares, y que tal vez han pasado su juventud en los colegios y universidades . . .” (it extends to many people of fine education, of no mean talent, and who have spent their youth in colleges and universities . . .).

The following are among the spelling mistakes that Lizardi says can be seen in publicly displayed signs:

“ChocolaTería famosa”, “Rial estanquiyo de puros y sigarros”, “El Barbero de Cebulla”, “La Horgullosa”, “El Sebero Dictador” (instead of Chocolatería Famosa, Real Estanquillo de Puros y Cigarros, El Barbero de Sevilla, La Orgullosa, and El Severo Dictador).

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With the end of Spain’s dominion over its colonies in America, efforts to reform the Spanish spelling system were made again. Evidence of those efforts can be seen in the influential journals *Biblioteca Americana*, published in London in 1823, and *Repertorio Americano*, published there in 1826-27 by Andrés Bello (Venezuela, 1781-1865) and Juan García del Río (Colombia, 1794-1856).

In Volume III of the *Repertorio Americano* dated April 1827, the article entitled “Ortografía Castellana” (Castilian Spelling) indicates that a reader had sent Bello, who was still living in London, a piece that had appeared in the Mexican newspaper *El Sol* in 1824. That piece dealt with a subject that Bello and García del Río had treated in 1823 in the *Biblioteca Americana* under the rubric “Indicaciones sobre la conveniencia de simplificar i uniformar la ortografía en América” (Suggestions about the convenience of simplifying and standardizing spelling in [Spanish] America).

As these dates show, the pace of trans-Atlantic communication at the beginning of the nineteenth century was extremely slow: 1823, an article is published in London; 1824, a reference

to it is made in the Mexican newspaper *El Sol*; in 1827, Bello, still in London, receives a comment on the *El Sol* article from a Mexican reader. In spite of the delay in communication, the impact of the message put forth by Bello and García del Río was great, for professional and amateur linguists seriously began to seek solutions to the problem of spelling.

Bello agreed that a guide to spelling should be produced. However, he believed that it would not be wise to put extensive reforms into effect at once. Therefore, he recommended that the reform process be executed in two stages.

In the first stage:

- the silent “h” in words like *hombre* would be removed, thus producing *ombre* for *hombre*,
- the “i” would replace a “y” at the end of a word (e.g., *rei* for *rey*) and “i” would take the place of “y” meaning “and”,
- the “j” would replace the “g” in “ge” and “gi” combinations (e.g., *jeneral* for *general* and *jigante* for *gigante*),
- the silent “u” in words like *queso* would be removed, thus producing *qeso*,
- the “z” would replace the “c” in “ce” and “ci” combinations, thus producing *zero* for *cero* and *zima* for *cima*, and
- the “r” at the beginning of a breath group and in stressed positions would be written with emphasis as pronounced, thus producing *rrápido* for *rápido* and *alrrededor* for *alrededor*.

In the second stage, Bello recommended that:

- the “q” be used instead of “c” in words like *como*, thus

producing *qomo*, and that

- the silent “u” be removed from words like *guerra*, thus producing *gerra*.

It's important to know that Bello's reputation as a scholar was so great that, in 1829, the government of Chile invited him to come to that country and undertake a role in its political and educational development. Not only did Bello become a Senator and act as Minister of the Interior, but in 1847 he also published his famous *Gramática de la lengua castellana destinada al uso de los americanos* (Grammar of the Castilian Language for Use by [Spanish] Americans). This book served for many decades as the principal grammatical resource in Spanish America.

Among Bello's other successes was the role he played in founding the University of Chile (1842). But at that time, he was not the only educator of note in the region. Together with the calm, objective, guarded Bello, Chile opened its doors to the impatient, opinionated, assertive Argentine exile Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-1888).

Sarmiento was an outspoken political activist, who on three occasions had to leave his embattled country of Argentina and flee to Chile. But Sarmiento was much more than an opponent of his nation's power structure. In Argentina, he had also been a writer and a teacher—a teacher so innovative that he even came into conflict with the governor of the province of San Juan, who couldn't accept Sarmiento's novel pedagogical methods.

In Chile, which, in contrast to Argentina, he considered to be well-ordered, safe, and industrious, Sarmiento actively engaged in public education. This was a field that he saw as the *sine qua non* of progress—an endeavor more important than the

construction of highways, the establishment of an efficient postal service, the attraction of “civilized” immigrants from Europe, and even freedom of the press.

As far as public education was concerned, however, Sarmiento observed that there was a paucity of practical teaching materials for Spanish American students. In his view, new materials would have to be produced locally. But how, if a stable, commonly used spelling system wasn’t available in the Hispanic world? The remedy was clear to Sarmiento: “antes de enseñar a leer a los que no saben, deben los que saben estar de acuerdo sobre la manera de representar en lo escrito los pensamientos que han de constituir la materia de la lectura . . .” (before teaching reading to those who don’t know how, those who do know should agree on the way to represent in writing the thoughts that should comprise the reading materials . . .).

In order to facilitate such an agreement, on 17 October 1843, Sarmiento, now the Director of the first teacher-training school in South America, presented his *Memoria sobre ortografía americana* (Report on [Spanish] American Spelling) to the University of Chile’s Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities.

Whereas Bello *dared* to suggest only a few changes in spelling—“hé aquí todas las reformas que nos hemos atrevido a introducir por aora” (these are all the reforms that we dare to introduce for now)—Sarmiento *dared* to be radical in his suggestions. His reason was clear: in order to liberate Chile from obscurantism, he was willing to fight against every obstacle—“contra la naturaleza, la nacionalidad, la sociedad entera” (against Nature, nationality, all of society). Great reforms, he believed, had to be undertaken “cerrando los ojos, y poniendo

mano a la obra . . . cuando la razón y la conveniencia están de acuerdo” (by closing your eyes and doing it . . . when reason and convenience are in agreement).

Well, unfortunately, Sarmiento’s enthusiasm for change led him to present his Report with his eyes closed to the true nature of Chilean reality. Chile in 1843 was not a radical, pioneering country, but a very conservative one—a land that prized stability and order. And it didn’t value speed where change was concerned.

So, it’s not surprising that it took the Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities seven months to announce his decision: namely, that spelling change must not be done quickly. It should be a “marcha prudente que no violenta el curso de las cosas humanas” (a prudent march that does no violence to the course of things human). If there were defects in the current system, he said, “no estorban el desarrollo del espíritu, ni imponen trabas a la difusión de las luces, ni producen tan graves molestias que equivalgan a los inconvenientes de una súbita mudanza” ([those defects] do not hinder development of the spirit, nor obstruct the diffusion of knowledge, nor produce problems so great as to equal the disadvantages of a sudden change).

According to the Dean, if Sarmiento’s spelling system were instituted, one of the disadvantages would be that, because it was so different, Chilean readers would be unable to read the literature of both the past and the present. What’s more, a radical change in spelling wouldn’t be in harmony with the spirit of the time: “El *justo medio*, el eclecticismo está a la orden del día, en política, en progreso, en literatura” (the *happy medium*, eclecticism [i.e., ‘choosing the best of the many’] is the order of

the day in politics, in progress, in literature). Consequently, the Faculty was disposed to recommend only a modest modification in spelling. The system it chose was that of Andrés Bello.

Like so many others who tried to reform spelling, Sarmiento learned the sad lesson that Nebrija had learned over three centuries before: “es dura cosa hacer novedad” (it’s hard to make change).

Benjamin Franklin, whose work was known to Sarmiento, learned that lesson, too. In 1768, while in London, Franklin proposed *A Scheme for a New Alphabet and a Reformed Mode of Spelling*. Franklin’s aim was simple: to have an alphabet in which each letter represented a single sound. That was a tall order for English, so Franklin invented some new letters and commissioned a foundry to cast type for his revised alphabet. It looked like this:

a b c d e f g h i k l m n o p r s t u

[æ] [b] [d] [ɛ] [f] [g] [h] [i] [k] [l] [m] [n] [o] [p] [r] [s] [t] [u]

v z a y h̄ η ħ h̄ t̄h̄ d̄h̄

[v] [z] [ɔ] [ʌ] [ə] [ŋ] [ʃ] [θ] [ʧ] [ðʒ]

*myſt az h̄i imperfekſiyn av h̄er alfabet
uil admit av ; h̄er prezent bad ſpeliyn iz
onli bad, bikaz k̄antreri to h̄i prezent bad
ruls : yndyr h̄i nu ruls it uuld bi gud.
— h̄i diſkylti av l̄yrniyn to ſpel uel in
h̄i old ué iz ſo grét, hat ſu atén it ;
h̄cauzands and h̄cauzands ryitiyn av to old
edfi, ūh̄caut ever bīiyn ebīl to akuyir
it. ’Tiz, biſyids, e diſkylti k̄ontinual̄i
inkriiſiyn ; av h̄i ſcaund gradual̄i veriz
mor and mor fram h̄i ſpeliyn : and to
ſaremyrs*

We're told that we'd write the passage this way:

Much as the imperfections of the alphabet will admit of; the present bad spelling is only bad because contrary to the present bad rules: under the new rules it would be good—the difficulty of learning to spell well in the old way is so great, that few attain it; thousands and thousands writing on to old age, without ever being able to acquire it. 'Tis, besides a difficulty continually increasing; as the sound gradually varies more and more from the spelling: and to foreigners.¹

Why didn't Franklin put this system into effect in his writings? Was it because, after thinking the matter over, he recognized the difficulties of doing so? Or could it have been because he just had too much to do in founding a new nation? After all, it was a busy time.

- In politics, old regimes were being toppled by a series of revolutionary movements—the American Revolution of 1776; the French Revolution of 1789; and the Wars of Independence that brought freedom to Spain's American colonies in the first third of the 19th century.
- In economics, the nature of life everywhere was being opened to radical change by the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution.
- And in the social order, the struggle for the rights of man and, then, for the rights of women was a powerful force for change in many segments of society.

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Chile was not exempt from the changes that these currents brought with them. As the century progressed, roads, bridges, railroads, telegraph lines, and water systems were being con-

structed; schools were being established; important advances in mining were being made; vast quantities of nitrates were being exported; a seemingly endless variety of manufactured goods and *objets d'art* were being imported from around the world.

Finally, with the aid of Germany and Britain, a modern army and navy were being created and, with them, Chile succeeded in defeating Peru and Bolivia in the War of the Pacific (1879-1883). Clearly, Chile was freeing itself from the shackles of the past and becoming a modern, *civilized* country.

To be “civilized” meant to vigorously oppose deceit, falsehood, hypocrisy. “Sincerity” was the ideal held by everyone, from the Cuban literary giant and national hero José Martí, who described himself as “un hombre sincero / de donde crece la palma” (a sincere man / from where the palm tree grows) to Rubén Darío, Spanish America’s most outstanding Modernist poet, who proclaimed that “ser sincero es ser potente” (to be sincere is to be powerful).

With this in mind, a new generation of educated people—many of them passionate young scientists—examined Chile’s system of orthography and found it *deceitful*—a system of spelling totally inappropriate for a progressive country like theirs. The young scientists knew that action was required. Well, what could be done to solve this problem?

They saw that some courageous individuals in Europe were inventing whole new languages. And there were good reasons for doing so. Thanks to advances in communications like the telegraph and the undersea cable, all parts of the planet were growing closer, the world was getting smaller. This meant that people living in different parts of the globe had to find an

efficient way to communicate with each other. It was clear that what would help overcome the linguistic barriers that separated them would be a universal language. Johann Martin Schleyer was one person who invented just such a language. In 1880, he brought *Volapük* to public attention.²

Another linguist of importance was Ludwig Lazarus Zamenhof, who was familiar with a variety of tongues, among them Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, Russian, German, Latin, Greek, English, French, and Italian. In 1887, Zamenhof published a book describing an international language which he had created. His invention became known as *Esperanto*. Its aim was not only to foster communication among peoples of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, but also to promote peaceful coexistence among them.³

Commendable as these linguistic projects were, it was obvious that they would not meet the internal needs of Chile. Another tool was needed. Could standardization be that tool? After all, efforts to bring about standardization were being made in a plethora of fields.

Internationally, for example, agreement was being reached on everything from standardizing musical pitch (1859), to procedures for the exchange of international mail (1874) and the establishment of international time zones (1884). Standardization, the young scientists saw, could work in Chile, as well—especially in public education. Education, however, depended on learning how to read and write. And learning these skills depended on having a standardized system of spelling.

Unfortunately, they claimed, with the spelling system then in use, children were taking 25% more time learning the basics

than was necessary; printing costs for textbooks were higher than they had to be; and newspapers like *El Mercurio* were filling hundreds of columns with useless letters. All of this could be remedied by introducing an *ortografía rrazional*—a rational orthography. With it, *sincerity* could be achieved in spelling. And, by this means, the language would become healthier, too—*más higiénica*.

Just look at the importance that these creators of a new spelling system gave to health:

- 1886-7, “Rresultado del eksámen kímiko i bakteriolójiko de algunas aguas de Chile” (Result of the chemical and bacteriological examination of some of Chile’s waters).
- 1888, “Notas sobre el espirilo del kólera asiátiko” (Notes on the spirochete of Asiatic cholera).
- 1893, “El ielo ke se konsume en Balparaíso” (The ice that is consumed in Valparaiso).
- 1893, “El aire en los teatros Odeon, Biktoria (Balparaíso) i Munizipal (Santiago) i en algunos lokales zerrados i abitados” (The air in the Odeon and Victoria theaters of Valparaiso, the Municipal theater of Santiago, and the interiors of some inhabited premises).⁴

This list allows us to see the connection that was made between spelling reform and the effort to improve the life of Chile’s citizens through science. For its promoters, introduction of the *ortografía rrazional* in the language was equivalent to using the power of antisepsis in matters of health. For them, purification of the spelling system of Spanish would result in having a more perfect tool for individual and national development. After all, hadn’t Zamenhof said that “The more a language

is perfect, the more accessible is a nation to Progress”?

For years, scholars had maintained that Spain was pretty advanced as far as spelling was concerned, because its orthography was much simpler and more direct than the systems used in France and England. In fact, even Sarmiento had agreed that Spain had produced “la ortografía más aproximativamente perfecta” (the most nearly perfect spelling system). “*Nearly* perfect” and “*really* perfect,” though, were not the same thing. And, so, the goal of the Chilean reformers was to reach perfection in spelling.

As they saw it, they would be able to accomplish this aim, because:

- They lived in an age of liberty when mankind had in its possession the scientific method which, with reason, made it possible to control the course of events.
- They lived in a progressive country.
- They had access to the most advanced ideas in the world.
- They possessed the same creative energy that brought about the victories which their noble ancestors had won.
- As evolutionists, they believed in purification as a natural law that led inevitably to perfection.
- As Modernists, they had faith in the power of *rugged individualism*, which together with a strong spirit of altruism, had guided the heroes of history in their service to mankind.
- With youth on their side, they saw themselves as invincible.

Around 1886, with faith in themselves and the value of their project, the proponents of *rational spelling* embarked

on a serious campaign to publicize their system by using it in newspapers, magazines, and books. By the first decade of the twentieth century they had published 48 original works and translations, as well as numerous newspaper and magazine articles with the new orthography.

Nevertheless, it was rough sledding. For example, in 1914, in a legal action, Carlos Newman, one of the most prominent of the Chilean reformers, used the new system of spelling in all of his documents and presented them that way to the court. Seeing “como desacato la presentación hecha en esa forma” (their presentation in that form as an act of contempt), the judge refused to accept the documents. Newman, though, opposed that ruling and made an appeal to the Supreme Court of Chile. In this instance, too, the judges ruled against Newman. Their position was that applications to the Court written in the rational orthography would not be accepted “por no ser ésta la usual y ordinaria que se emplea en las que se presentan a los tribunales y demás poderes” (because this was not the customary way in which [applications] are presented to tribunals and other legal institutions).

But this wasn't the end of the story. Things were changing in Chile. By this time, Chile was experiencing a period of disorder. In politics, for example, the Presidential Cabinet tended to be reorganized an average of three times a year. In 1911, the Board of Public Education ordered that no specific spelling system should be required of students in their exams. Of course, as far as the reformers were concerned, this was a step in their favor. But the Board's acceptance of diversity in spelling just made things more confusing for teachers and students alike.

And so it went until 1927 when Carlos Ibáñez became

President. Under Ibáñez, it was decreed that the spelling system approved by the Spanish Royal Academy should be used in all public documents and in all schools in the Republic. Thus, after more than 80 years, those who struggled to reform Chile's system of spelling lost the final battle.

Was this a positive step or not? Obviously, if the scientific and environmental achievements of the Chilean reformers had been applied by their contemporaries, the nation would have enjoyed both short-term and long-term health benefits. But where, we might ask, would Chile be if these proponents of the *rational orthography* had won the dispute about spelling? Would their victory not have led to the country's lexicographical isolation? After all, how would Chileans read what had been written elsewhere in the Hispanic world? And how would the inhabitants of the other Hispanic nations read works written by the citizens of Chile? The answer is self-evident: each group would have to learn to read texts that looked very different from their own. Without a doubt, this would deter both from making the effort.

Notes

- 1 See <<http://www.omniglot.com/writing/franklin.htm>>.
- 2 For information on Schleyer and *Volapük*, see <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volapük>>.
- 3 *Esperanto* still has its enthusiasts. See <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esperanto>>.
- 4 See Robert Jay Glickman, *Fin del siglo: retrato de Hispanoamérica en la época modernista*. Toronto: Canadian Academy of the Arts, 1999, p. 255.