

What's the Difference?

Spanish for Latin America or Spain? Neutral or Localized Spanish for Latin America?

By Language & Culture Worldwide, LLC

We are often asked to translate into Spanish, and the person requesting the translation isn't quite sure whether it should be for Spain or for Latin American, or what the difference is. Here, we discuss the differences, when adaptation is necessary, and things to consider when dealing with translating either dialect. We also reflect on the regional differences across Latin America, and touch on a few related points regarding the influence of culture on the process.

We already translate into Spanish for our Spain offices. Is it necessary to adapt the translation of the materials for a Latin American office?

The difference between the Spanish used in Spain and the Spanish used in Latin America is similar to the difference between American English and UK English. In most cases, people from both places can understand each other quite easily. Well, except...

- When slang or idioms are used (posh, lorry, barry)
- If the speaker has a strong accent
- If references are made to entirely British, Australian, or American cultural phenomena (e.g. an older Brit will immediately know what "when the money went decimal" means)
- In some instances where grammar and spelling are different and actually look incorrect to the other (e.g. *At the weekend, I was on holiday*, organisation, behaviour, favourite, carburettor, etc.)
- When acronyms have completely different meanings (e.g. BOE: Bank of England/ Board of Education. MP: Member of Parliament/ Military Police)
- When completely different words are used ("We loaded the pram in the boot and headed to the high road for a stroll"; "I need to find a cashpoint to get some money"; "I cut my finger, I need a plaster")

As you can see, there are numerous cases where your audience will not completely understand content intended for the other audience. Also, there are terms and phrases in either language that describe innocuous things on one side of the Atlantic, that not only have a completely different meaning, but can be rude or embarrassing when used in the other dialect. Some quick, but not overly crude examples would be "pants" (only used to refer to undergarments in the UK), "I'm stuffed" (meaning you have had enough food in the US, meaning that you are pregnant in the UK) and "bog", which to Americans is a marsh, but in the UK is a term for bathroom.



So is it necessary to adapt from British English to American English? Not necessarily, unless it is important that the listener get all of the information, in such a way that makes complete sense to them, without exception. It is the same with Spanish – the Latin American Spanish-speakers will understand most of what is being said by a Spaniard, but that does not mean there will not be exceptions, where something is missed or seems very foreign and rather incomprehensible.

We have a Latin American Spanish version we used for all countries from Mexico to Argentina. Is that usually sufficient?

It often surprises many young Midwesterners to find out that not everyone in all 50 states across the US speaks exactly like they do, especially given that most national news reporters seem to speak with their same accent. What they do not know is that this "neutral accent" has been intentionally adopted by newscasters¹, even though it does not necessarily reflect the day-to-day speech patterns of every American. Similarly, a neutral Spanish can be used that will be understandable by most everyone throughout Latin America, even if it does not sound exactly like their friends and families sound.

Accents aside, if you try and convince a farmer from the Great Plains how important it is to have insurance, for everything from Hurricane to Earthquake insurance, it will quickly seem irrelevant and may even cause him to wonder whether anything you have to sell relates to him at all. The same is true

¹ [American English: An Introduction](#) By Zoltán Kövecses ; [Journalism in the Digital Age: Theory and Practice for Broadcast, Print and Online Media](#) By John Herbert ; www.wikipedia.org "General America" ; www.televisionnewsanchor.info "Learn How to Anchor from Professional Anchors"

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in Latin American; although they might understand what you are saying, it becomes clear that the message is not really intended for them as soon as the message contains irrelevant information or data. It is therefore important to remember that food, weather, pastimes, social norms, and standard business practices can vary widely from one end of Latin American to another, just as much as they can vary from one end of the US to another.

In addition, depending on the number of locations you are translating for, using a "neutral" version of Spanish might miss the mark in getting your point across, but it could have the potential to offend. For example, the Puerto Rican term for "clothespin", which in Nicaragua means "stingy", and in Columbia can mean "putting on airs", is a vulgar term in Mexico. "Coche" means "car" in Spain and Southern Mexico, but means "baby stroller" in most of the rest of the Spanish-speaking world. A commonly



used verb in Colombia, Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Panama and Spain, meaning to catch, seize, to pick (fruit), and to take (a bus), can be used in translations in those countries without issue. However, in Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay and Chile, it is a vulgar slang term, and should usually be omitted from a professional translation. You can see how trying to make a translation coherent for a "Latin American" audience can be difficult. A good neutral-Spanish translator will be familiar with these differences in usage, and will try to avoid these kinds of terms altogether in a translation, but there is always a greater chance for misunderstanding when you try to internationalize content to fit a wider audience rather than a specific one.

So, when is it necessary to *localize* material further than a neutral Latin American Spanish? In other words, adapt your content in such a way that it is better understood in specific countries or locations, rather than a wide geographic area? If your goal is merely to inform or get a simple message across, you may do well with an understandable neutral Spanish message, and will likely save yourself time and money. If you are attempting to convince, persuade, or sell, you will probably want to speak to them more directly, including specifics about their lives, work environments, and approach to living and working. For example, some television advertisements which are broadcast in the Spanish language media across Latin American include a small "disclaimer" explaining which country the ad is "valid" for. A middle approach would be to have your content translated into neutral Spanish, but then have it reviewed (quickly) locally, either by internal or external parties.

So how can I determine if I should localize or not? What are the best practices?

A major point to consider is if someone from outside the country will have the appropriate background in order to communicate the country-specific message. As with all translation, background knowledge is just as important as knowledge of a second language. The average American does not have any particular knowledge of chemistry or medical terminology, so if they were asked to explain an article in a chemistry or medical journal in their own language, they would completely lack the knowledge to do so. The same applies to translation; just because someone speaks English and Spanish fluently, and even might have experience translating, does not mean they can translate medical journals, legal documents, engineering content, other highly-technical content, or possibly even *local* content. As an example, one of LCW's partners is fluent in Spanish, and lived in Argentina for many years. Prior to delivering a training for industrial workers in a small town in Mexico, he had to talk to local Mexican people about specific industrial terminology, which he was either unfamiliar with, or was completely different in Argentina.

If the content is, for example, a interview with Bolivian indigenous people talking about agricultural practices, and you need that video transcribed and translated into English, then you will probably need to find a



Bolivian (or perhaps Peruvian) translator who can understand the accented Spanish of the local indigenous people (who are likely to speak Quechua rather than Spanish as a first language), understand the local terminology they will use, and preferably would have some kind of background speaking directly with indigenous Quechua-speaking people. Translators should have the expertise to identify these kinds of issues, as translation buyers will not always have the necessary culture knowledge to make these kinds of judgment calls. If you asked a Mexican translator to translate this kind of content, they may accept the job and may capture the main ideas, but they will probably lack the context that you would get from using a native Bolivian. In contrast, there have definitely been times when a client contacted LCW, and inquired about localization services, but due to the scope of their project, or the nature of their content, the value-add simply was not there to warrant the time, energy, and cost to localize their content. Whether or not to localize is all about the demographics of your audience, your budget, time constraints, and the value-add you are looking for.



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Best practices for localization are simple: the more information a translator or agency receives on a given job, the better they can ascertain your need. Assuming you don't have much access to cultural or language resources internally, if the translator or agency receives your finalized content for translation, and enough background (particularly in terms of who the audience is), then they should be able to give you a fair assessment of the level of localization that would be optimal on a given job. In the above example, if all you told your translation vendor was: "I need this translated from Spanish into English. I think it's from Bolivia", the vendor really won't have enough information to give you a fair assessment. Some of the questions your translator or agency will probably want to know prior to localizing: Where specifically will this translation be read? Who will be reading it? Is it a newsletter, training manual, poster, script, etc.? What are you hoping to achieve by translating it? Are you looking for a more literal, or more meaning-centered translation? Of course, once you've developed a relationship with your translator or agency, you probably won't need to address these questions on every project, but it is a best practice to always keep these questions in mind.

Educational level, specific locality, socioeconomic class and job level (manager, line worker) all can have an influence on the general tone and word choice for a localization project. Localization adds depth, context, and may communicate the meaning of the original content more effectively, but the associated costs and time is not always warranted, and the value-add is not always significant enough to require it. Provide as much information as you can gather, and find an expert to consult.

What role do cultural differences play in localization?

While the differences between Mexico and Argentina are not as pronounced as, say, those between Germany and China, there are differences, and in certain contexts people may be put off if those differences are glossed over. How would you feel if someone told you that there was no difference between Americans, Canadians, the English, South Africans and Australians? What if someone told you that all Americans were the same, whether they were from Texas, California, Minnesota or New York City? If you are an American, you can probably instantly tell if someone is from another English-speaking country, or even from another US state, from their accent, and possibly their dress or mannerisms. Latin Americans can often identify other Latin Americans based on accents, clothing, etc. as well. If you have experience in dealing with these kinds of regional differences, you are probably familiar with how significant they can be. The written word does not always

reflect these differences, but it is important to remember that they exist. A best practice would be to inquire if those differences could possibly affect the message of your content for translation. (e.g. if your translation will be read over a wide range of countries and cultures, such as rural southern Mexico, urban Santiago, Chile, and Caribbean Puerto Rico.)

While most South and Central Americans speak Spanish, they may also not see themselves as having a great deal in common, particularly if there are other major cultural differences such as class and generation between the two countries. More urbanized South American cultures with low indigenous populations might see themselves as more European than "Latin" (Argentina, Chile) with exception. Latin America is diverse, not only in terms of culture, but also in terms of languages. You are probably aware that Portuguese is spoken in Brazil (150 million + speakers), not Spanish. However, you may not be aware that there are also 6 major active indigenous language groups in Latin America, with around 15 million speakers. Although indigenous languages are not widely used in a professional context, in Bolivia and Paraguay, various indigenous languages have co- or joint-official status with Spanish². There are even communities in Latin America where German is spoken regularly (approximately 1 million speakers), after several waves of German and Jewish immigration to Latin America between the 18th century and the 1940's. There are plenty of contexts in which grouping Latin Americans together might not have any consequences, but it's important to understand the diversity within Latin America, and that there may be times when you'll need to take these language and cultural differences into account, to adapt content for a specific linguistic group or a specific culture.

It's a multicultural world...
Are you ready?[™]

² University of Texas at Austin Archive of the Indigenous languages of Latin America http://www.ailla.utexas.org/site/la_langs.html