

Neutral Spanish: Is it Necessary? Does it Exist?

Guillermo Cabanellas de las Cuevas

Reprinted with permission from *Proteus*, the newsletter of the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators Volume XII, No. 4. Fall 2003

Spanish translators are puzzled by an increasingly common request: the client wants a translation to be in “neutral Spanish.” But the translator may wonder: is it possible to write in neutral Spanish? And is it necessary or even appropriate?

First Encounter with the Monster

Those of us who have been in the language business long enough know that this is not the first time that “neutral Spanish” has reared its ugly head. But the reasons for its unwelcome presence have changed.

In the old days — say, 50 or 25 years ago — the concept of neutral Spanish had an ideological, or more precisely, right-wing flavor. Neutral Spanish was promoted or imposed to prevent the use of more “popular” types of Spanish, particularly local slang or parlance. Thus, in Argentina, during the 1940’s, several tangos were banned due to the fact that the lyrics included undesirable slang; others underwent adjustment to conform to the linguistic requirements of the authorities. More recently, during the 1980’s, under yet another military government, the use of neutral Spanish was promoted in Argentine radio and television for a number of reasons. First, to “protect” the citizenry against the use of “incorrect” Spanish, which the applicable regulations prohibited or discouraged.¹ Second, to “protect” against the “incorrect” use of foreign words in Spanish speech. Third, to “protect” against the propagation, particularly in television, of English-language programs dubbed in other Latin American countries,² since the language used was non-neutral — i.e. Mexican, Venezuelan, etc — Spanish.

During the following decades, a more tolerant attitude toward individual preferences extended to linguistic usage. Foreign, i.e. non-Argentine, accents and words were increasingly welcomed in radio and television, seen as forming part of the “big fatherland” (*la patria grande*), which included all of Latin America.

But recently neutral Spanish has made a comeback, for reasons very different from the earlier ones. One reason for the current emphasis on neutral Spanish translations is the need to market goods and services throughout the Spanish-speaking world. A toothpaste box, a record, or a film have to contain words understandable in all the Spanish-speaking countries where these products will be marketed. Hence the request for translations in neutral Spanish, to save the effort and cost of revising the translation for each country. Another reason originates in international transactions: parties are concerned that in contracts involving different countries, misunderstandings will arise if a national variety of Spanish is used instead of a hypothetically mutually understandable neutral Spanish.

Faced with these and other similar requests, the questions for the translator are: is it necessary to use neutral Spanish to satisfy these basically legitimate needs? And if so, what constitutes neutral Spanish?

The Monster Described

Immediate suspicion regarding neutral Spanish may arise when we realize that we carry on our daily lives in Spanish-speaking countries without having to resort to a special construct. And there is no lack of contact with Spanish speakers from different countries. On a daily basis we have conversations with foreign clients, we read foreign books, we watch foreign television programs. Some of our own family members may be foreign. But we never feel the need for this colorless verbal construct, neutral Spanish.

Additional suspicion arises when we notice that authorities on the Spanish language — as opposed to manufacturers of toothpaste, distributors of films, military governments and multinational entrepreneurs — never use the expression “neutral Spanish” nor feel the need for it. The *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* refers in its foreword to the Spanish language (*lengua española*) and sets as its goal maintaining “the unity of the language” and not the creation of some type of neutral or hybrid Spanish. In his foreword to María Moliner’s acclaimed *Diccionario de Uso del Español*, Manuel Seco describes the contents of the dictionary as an assemblage of “standard language” (*lengua estándar*). My father’s *Diccionario Enciclopédico de Derecho Usual*, the most widely used legal dictionary in Spanish-speaking countries (and I say that without filial partiality) notes: “Due to the idiomatic unity linking all Spanish-American republics, words originating from Spain belong now equally to all Spanish-speaking peoples.”³ Even Microsoft, in the Word program I am now using, uses the expression “traditional Spanish” as alternative to the “national” varieties of Spanish it lists in the language set under “tools.”

Do toothpaste manufacturers know something about Spanish that all these dictionary writers ignore? Or is it the other way around?

To answer this question, we have to take a brief look at how Spanish is used in the different countries in which it is the national language. There is a core, common to all countries, which we may call Spanish X. In addition, each country, and many regions and even specific neighborhoods, have developed idiosyncratic varieties of Spanish, which differ to a greater or lesser extent from Spanish X; we may call these varieties Spanish Y.⁴

Normally, every Spanish-speaking person will speak both Spanish X and Spanish Y. The novelist and essayist Mario Vargas Llosa normally writes in Spanish X, but in his autobiographical work *El pez en el agua*, he writes certain passages in Piuran Spanish (the department of Piura is located in the north of Peru). Jorge Luis Borges wrote in Spanish X, but poems such as “*Para las seis cuerdas*” are written in a variation of Argentine Spanish.

This double linguistic level helps explain why, while it is possible to identify dozens and even hundreds of Spanish language varieties, the basic unity of the language — so dear to dictionary writers — is preserved.

The neutral Spanish advocates could now say: “Okay, call it Spanish X, or standard language, or traditional Spanish (like Microsoft), or even correct Spanish (as is frequently the case). These are just different names for the same phenomenon: neutral Spanish.”

But to see why this view is not correct we may analyze several examples. Suppose that our hypothetical client wants to market peaches in the Spanish-speaking world. What word should he use on his cans? *Melocotón* (used in Spain and other countries) or *durazno* (used in Argentina and other countries, and even in certain parts of Spain)?

There is no “neutrality” for this conundrum. We cannot mix *melocotón* and *durazno* and get a “melozno” or a “duracotón”. We might count how many Spanish-speakers use one word or the other and reach a “majority decision.” But if the relevant universe is the Spanish-speaking world, Mexican Spanish would prevail, and since Mexico is not prone to linguistic imperialism, even Mexicans would not find such a solution reasonable, desirable or “neutral.” Similar problems arise with many other words: *acera* (Spain) and *vereda* (Argentina); *aguacate* (Spain) and *palta* (Argentina); *cambur* (Venezuela), *banana* (Argentina) and *plátano* (Spain), and so on.

Faced with this difficulty, one may advocate for a form of Spanish devoid of national color; indeed, this seems to be what some clients are looking for. But such an approach has serious shortcomings. First, because of the way the Spanish language has evolved, it is impossible to avoid some degree of national color; a peach is *melocotón*, which sounds Spanish, or *durazno*, which sounds Argentine, without “colorless” alternatives. Of course one may avoid “color” by using multiple alternatives

from different countries in the same text, but this would only create confusion in the audience as to the origin of the person writing or speaking, not additional clarity. Second, “colorless” Spanish, if such a thing were possible, may be as hard or harder to understand than “national” Spanish — witness the Spanish translations of Hegel or Heidegger, where the terminology of the original forces the translator to avoid local “color”: they are among the most obscure texts ever written in the Spanish language. Finally, most masterpieces of Spanish prose, widely read in all Spanish-speaking countries, such as the works of Unamuno, Ortega y Gasset, Borges, Alfonso Reyes or García Márquez, are written in strongly national Spanish, but this has not in any way weakened their clarity or popularity. It is hardly possible to read a page by Unamuno or Ortega y Gasset without realizing that the writer is Spanish, and not Uruguayan or Cuban; nevertheless they are among the most widely-read and clear pieces of nonfiction in the Spanish language. They are written in standard Spanish, not neutral Spanish, and they circulate throughout the Spanish-speaking world.

Throughout the centuries, the solution Spanish speakers and writers have developed for linguistic differences has not been to seek a non-existent neutral or middle ground. The solution — and what the toothpaste makers, international businessmen and film distributors really need — is a form of Spanish understandable by all readers or listeners. Not an impossible hybrid such as neutral Spanish, but rather a form of Spanish X, standard Spanish or traditional Spanish, which readers and listeners from all countries would find understandable. This language will vary depending on the audience to which a given text is directed.

Using standard Spanish is a necessary but not a sufficient precondition for a text to be understandable in all Spanish-speaking countries. *Andá al boliche y traé birra y puchos* (“Go to the bar and bring beer and cigarettes”) is not generally understandable outside Argentina, and would be inadvisable in all other countries. But *sobre las piezas dentales frotareis la mercadería gelatinosa que se os expende*, while correct standard Spanish, is highly inadvisable for a toothpaste box; toothpaste users in all countries would certainly be puzzled and misled by such instructions. The problem is not solved by “neutralizing” the Spanish, whatever that may be, but rather by using traditional or standard Spanish adjusted to the needs of the audience. This is true of any language. In fact, English, facing a vast array of national and local variants, is a viable means of communication throughout the English-speaking world (and beyond), without having to resort to a “neutralization” process.

The Monster Speaks

Neutral Spanish has been advocated not only for texts but also for speech. “We need an interpreter who will speak neutral Spanish” is the request sometimes heard in international events. But no such interpreter exists.

Spoken Spanish has many variants. Argentines, for instance, generally pronounce c’s, s’s and z’s as phonetically identical; while Spaniards clearly distinguish the sound of c’s and z’s from the sound of s’s. Sometimes Argentines pronounce s’s as if they were j’s (“*cajtillo*”, for *castillo*; “*majculino*”, for *masculino*). Andalusians use famously strong and frequent z’s. Argentines pronounce ll’s as if they were y’s. Paraguayans use notoriously strong phonetic stresses, and so on. There is no way to create a middle ground between these local phonetic varieties. If z’s are phonetically distinguished from s’s, this will sound familiar and correct to a Spaniard, but foreign to an Argentine. If they are pronounced the same, it will go unnoticed in Argentina, but sound odd in most parts of Spain.

One way to overcome these difficulties has been to eliminate the salient features of national or local speech. Thus z’s are distinguished but made soft; s’s are softened, unlike in Spain, where they can be heard fifty yards away from the speaker; local peculiarities — such as the Paraguayan stress, or the Buenos Aires habit of not pronouncing the s’s at the end of words (“*bueno día*” instead of “*buenos días*”) — are avoided, etc. One may choose to call this type of speech neutral, but in fact it is a mixture of different accents and pronunciations. A Spaniard will notice that z’s are pronounced in a “foreign” way, but will not be able to identify the speaker’s origin, since other elements of speech will have different country characteristics, including some from Spain. The same will happen to an Argentine, and so forth.

I have seen this type of Spanish amalgam at work in my own house. My father was born in Spanish Morocco, raised on the Spanish mainland, lived for many years in Uruguay and Paraguay and for thirty-nine years in Argentina. He spoke a basic Argentine Spanish with Andalusian traits (he put z's everywhere), mixed with some words not used in Argentina, some pronunciations not heard in Argentina (*pijama* instead of *piyama*). One virtue this type of speech has is that it's impossible to determine where the person comes from.

What conference organizers, cartoon producers and other users of interpreter services want is clear Spanish, Spanish that will be understood by all Spanish-speaking listeners. But this will not be achieved by the colorless language sometimes identified as neutral Spanish. There is some consensus among Spanish speakers that the clearest Spanish is spoken in Andean Colombia and in coastal Peru. But these varieties of Spanish are clear because of the way words are pronounced and sentences built, and not because of the absence of local color. Andean Colombian speech is Andean Colombian Spanish, not neutral Spanish.

Advocates of "neutral Spanish" should consider that the type of language they think they want would exclude from the ranks of accepted speakers Miguel de Cervantes, Miguel de Unamuno, Octavio Paz and members of the Real Academia Española, among others. It is a strange choice, and one unlikely to produce many friends among Spanish speakers.

The Monster Avoided

The "neutral Spanish" advocate may answer: "The fact is that, as you just mentioned, there are hundreds of local and national varieties of oral and written Spanish. We don't care what you call it, but the fact is that we still need some type of lingua franca to overcome this linguistic mess." The fact is that such lingua franca already exists and is called "correct Spanish," "traditional Spanish," "standard Spanish," or for our purposes, "Spanish X."

Let's go through the life of a citizen of Tierra de Fuego, the uttermost part of the Spanish-speaking empire, to see how he copes with the linguistic difficulties posed by the variants of Spanish. I choose Tierra del Fuego not only because it's remote, but also because it was the last part of the world (except for certain neighborhoods of Chicago) in which Spanish took hold as the dominant language. Until the end of the 19th century little Spanish was spoken there; few Europeans lived there and a good proportion of them spoke English.⁵ Fuegian Spanish is a mixture of different varieties of Argentine Spanish, with some Chilean undertones.

Fuegians don't learn "Spanish Spanish" or "standard Spanish" as something different from "Argentine Spanish." Do they live in linguistic isolation from the rest of the world? Do they travel with Argentine-Spanish dictionaries? Do they take courses in traditional Spanish or in neutral Spanish? No. If our Fuegian goes to a bookstore in his hometown, and buys a book by García Márquez, does the book include a glossary for Fuegians, since García Márquez is Colombian? No. Oddly enough, the only books with glossaries he will likely find in a bookstore are those written in archaic Spanish or in rural Argentine Spanish: *El Mío Cid* is published in "bilingual" editions, i.e. translated into contemporary Spanish; "*Martin Fierro*," the Argentine national poem, much of whose terminology is nowadays beyond the grasp of Argentine readers. Now suppose that our Fuegian goes to the cinema in Ushuaia or in Río Grande (Tierra del Fuego's main towns) to watch a Spanish film, say, directed by Almodóvar. Will the film be subtitled? Again, no. True, some words will be used that are never used in Tierra del Fuego; some verbs will be conjugated differently. But in fact, that is part of the attraction of Spanish films: linguistic usage is different from what it is in Argentina. But on no account is it different enough to render it incomprehensible to Argentines.

Now our Fuegian travels to Honduras. Does he tremble in anticipation of his trip from the airport to the hotel, not knowing what to say to the taxi driver? No, he will probably have a lively chat with the driver about weather, soccer and other favorite topics, and both of them will likely be pleased to hear a different accent from the usual.

Then our Fuegian travels to Tijuana, the other end of Spanish America. He buys the newspaper. Does he ask the locals to help him with the language? No, except for baseball terminology, about which the Fuegian hasn't the foggiest idea (no baseball is played in Tierra del Fuego, so he would not understand it in Argentina, either).

Finally, the travelling Fuegian visits the city of Jaca, in the Spanish Pyrenees. He wants to order lunch. Will he go hungry? Or will he have a fluent chat with the waiter, where the latter will describe some of the local dishes the Fuegian is not familiar with? It is only if the Fuegian ventures fifty miles to the north that his linguistic misadventures will begin. And that's because French will be spoken, a different language entirely.

The Vast Empire

How did this vast linguistic empire to which the Fuegian belongs come into being? The Spanish empire (which did not produce a single idea in three centuries, as Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, former Argentine president and writer used to say) did have some major accomplishments: linguistic unity was one of them. Unity did not, and does not, mean uniformity. It meant and means a common core, shared by all Spanish-speaking peoples who speak standard Spanish, traditional Spanish. Around this nucleus are constantly changing national and regional variations. But the nucleus is strong enough to allow fluent communication among hundreds of millions of Spanish speakers in many parts of the globe. This is the famous unity of the Spanish language, so dear to dictionary writers and to travelers.

The unity did not result from laws. Given the disrespect toward the rule of law in Spanish America, it would have been impossible to impose such linguistic consensus by legal obligation. It is, rather, the result of shared value for language. No law forces millions of Latin Americans to follow the Real Academia Española's rules, although a change of rules — abolishing ch's and ll's as letters of the Spanish alphabet, for instance — will be obeyed without hesitation by millions of Spaniards and Latin Americans. No pressure, no coercion, no violence is involved, only an army of teachers ready to use and teach these rules.

Thus our Fuegian, by the blue glaciers of his remote island, can comfortably read the works of García Márquez and the story of the man who remembered the first day he met the cold.

The Monster Dismissed

E pluribus unum. I cannot think of a better description of the Spanish language's success. If it were inflexibly uniform, it would sooner or later be rejected by its users. Many decades ago, Borges clamored for a language adapted to our needs, a language that would reflect "the power of our summers." We probably have that language, and it arose by adaptation, and by maintaining a core common to all Spanish-speaking countries that allows us to understand and be understood by Spanish speakers with very different backgrounds and experiences.

This advantage would not be strengthened by the creation of an impossible hybrid, neutral Spanish, a hybrid that would exclude practically everyone, since nobody speaks or writes neutral Spanish. We all write and speak hyphenated Spanish, as it were, from Castillian Spanish to Patagonian Spanish.

Translators can write in correct Spanish, and adjust the texts to the needs of their readers, as with any other language. It will be perfectly understood.

[The author is professor at the University of Buenos Aires and the University of Illinois, coauthor of the English-Spanish Law Dictionary (Butterworth, Heliasta) and partner at the law office of Cabanellas, Etchebarne & Kelly in Buenos Aires, Argentina.]

FOOTNOTES

¹ See Argentine Decree 286/1981, art. 1(d).

² Dubbing of foreign programs in Argentina was promoted by Law 22.285.

³ Cabanellas de Torres, G., 2002. *Diccionario Enciclopédico de Derecho Usual*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Heliasta.

⁴ For example, dictionaries of Argentine Spanish usage (argentinismos) are generally large volumes, covering 400 pages or more. There are also similarly large dictionaries for Spanish usage in specific provinces and cities (especially Buenos Aires) in Argentina.

⁵ In fact, the masterpiece of Fuegian literature, L. Bridge's "Uttermost Part of the World," was written in English.