

Neutral Spanish

Neutral Spanish is not new. It is a recurring theme, one that has been brought front and center recently by the Internet and global communications. Translation services are offering it and clients are requesting it. But what is “Neutral Spanish”? Most will agree that “Neutral Spanish” is not a language. It is the name given to the process that translators go through to select the term or terms best suited to a multinational and multicultural target audience.

Spanish, like any other widely spoken language, is not “vanilla” or standard. Each place, region, country, community where Spanish is spoken has added its own flavor to the language - they have adopted different words, grammatical constructs and distinct accents. For example, when Argentines dive into a swimming pool, they dive into a “pileta”. However, in Uruguay, where a swimming pool is “piscina”, they would be jumping head-first into the “kitchen sink” (Ouch!). (Something you definitely need to keep in mind if you are in the resort or swimming pool business.) On the other hand, “swimming pool” in Mexico is “alberca”, which means “reservoir” in Spain, a “sink” (for washing clothes) in Colombia and a “trough” (comedero) in Bolivia and Perú. OK, you get the idea...

Now let's assume that we are working on a translation project that includes the term “swimming pool”, and our target audience is all the Spanish speaking population of the world. According to the rules, we can only select one term for “swimming pool” and our choices are: “pileta”, “piscina” and “alberca”. Which one would make our translation more “neutral”? We would select “piscina”. But, is this the right choice?

A quick check in Google (google.es) reveals the following (What a marvelous tool, the Internet!):

- “Piscina” gets 3,570,000 hits, including some hits to U.S. sites referring to “swimming pool safety”.
- “Pileta” gets only 108,000 hits, including some where the meaning is “kitchen sink” or “bathroom sink”.
- “Alberca” gets 235,000 hits, including some hits on sites in Spain, where the meaning is not “swimming pool”.

No, it is not suggested that you select “neutral” terms in Spanish by consulting Google. This method was only used for purposes of illustration for this article. The decision

should be based on your best assessment of which term is most appropriate for the target audience, based on your experience, and after careful research. The operative word is “best assessment.”

Technical text tends to be more neutral and many terms are shared by Spanish speakers worldwide. For example, “reflectómetro de dominio frecuencial” (frequency-domain reflectometer) will be understood by Spanish-speaking professionals everywhere with knowledge of the subject. The same applies to “microquímica” (microchemistry), “MRI (imágenes por resonancia magnética)” (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) and other such terms. Of course, there are exceptions. For example, a computer is “una computadora” in Latin America, but “un ordenador” in Spain. Therefore, to keep it “neutral” we suggest using “equipo”, “equipo informático”, or another “neutral” term that properly conveys the intended meaning. Avoid using “computadora” or “ordenador”.

If you are dealing with the spoken language, as in the case of an interpreter, in addition to choice of words, you need to go through the process of selecting the appropriate accent (inflection, tone, rhythm) for your target audience. There was an article recently in the Washington Post about Telemundo, a U.S. Spanish-language television network, and how they have been able to reduce the significant competitive edge of their major competitor, Univision, who is the leading Spanish-language television network in the U.S. Among other changes, Telemundo decided to train the actors of their telenovelas (prime time soap operas) to speak like Mexicans, specifically, like Mexican television news anchors. Anyone aspiring to become an actor in a Telemundo telenovela must be able to speak in a well-paced, accent free rhythm, whether they are originally from Cuba, Argentina, Colombia, Venezuela, Perú or Chile. Univision also encourages accent-free Spanish among its actors, but it does not enforce it like Telemundo does. And another interesting fact: Both presidential campaigns in the recent elections used “neutralized” Spanish in their Spanish-language television ads targeting Hispanic voters.

According to Telemundo, this “neutralized” Spanish is the middle ground between Colombian Spanish, that they consider too fast and terse, and some Caribbean accents that are, in their opinion, too slow and imprecise. For Telemundo executives, Mexican Spanish is “the broadest-appeal, easiest-to-understand Spanish”. Needless to say, not everyone agrees, particularly Colombian television and cultural critics. Many Colombians believe that their version of Spanish is the purest spoken. But the article also mentions that about eighty percent of Telemundo’s potential audience -- households whose viewing habits are monitored by Nielsen -- is Mexican. Could it be that Telemundo is merely providing good customer service and localizing their message to the requirements of their largest audience? The bottom line is that Telemundo is doing better against their major competitor, so they must be doing something right.

The “neutralization” process should also include paying attention to variations in grammatical constructs, such as pronoun to verb correspondences. An example, is the “voseo” that consists in the use of the pronoun “vos” instead of “tú”, followed by the corresponding form of the verb - “vos sabés” instead of “tú sabes” (you know). The “voseo” is common in Argentina, but used also in other Latin American countries. It should not be confused with “Vosotros sabéis”, the form used in Spain, but not in Latin

America. Other examples are “tú sabés” (instead of “tú sabes”) used in Uruguay, for instance; and forms like “tú tenís” (you have) – a variation on “vosotros tenéis” and “tú tienes” – used in Chile. “Neutral Spanish” uses “ustedes” instead of “vosotros” for the second person plural and “usted” for the second person singular. Therefore “you know” (where “you” is singular) is “usted sabe” and the plural form is “ustedes saben”.

A complete analysis of the Spanish language is most definitely beyond the scope of this article, so we will leave it at this. Hopefully, we’ve succeeded in explaining why “Neutral Spanish” does not consist in creating a new language, or coining new terms, but in carefully selecting words that will convey your message so it will be understood, to varying degrees, by most of your targeted audience and, hopefully, misunderstood by none.

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