

CHOOSING THE CORRECT VERSION OF SPANISH



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Choosing the Correct Version of Spanish

In June of 2005, Spanish or Portuguese (1) was spoken by about 43 million people in the USA. In 2006, the total US population was estimated to be approximately 300 million. Therefore, Latinos represent about 15-16% of the US population. By comparison, the African-American population for 2006 was estimated to represent 12.8% of the total US population.

The table below lists Spanish speakers in the eighteen most "Hispanic" states of the US and the type of Spanish they speak:

State	Number of Spanish speakers	% of total state population	Dominant version of Spanish
New Mexico	823,352	43.27	Mexican
California	12,442,626	34.72	Mexican
Texas	7,781,211	34.63	Mexican
Arizona	1,608,698	28.03	Mexican
Nevada	1,998,257	22.80	Mexican
Colorado	878,803	19.10	Mexican
Florida	3,304,832	19.01	Cuban
New York	3,076,697	15.96	Puerto Rican
New Jersey	1,294,422	14.90	Puerto Rican
Illinois	1,774,551	13.94	Mexican
Connecticut	371,818	10.63	Puerto Rican
Utah	253,073	10.45	Mixed
Rhode Island	111,823	10.35	Puerto Rican
Oregon	343,278	9.56	Mixed
Idaho	123,900	8.88	Mixed
DC	47,258	8.53	Mixed
Washington	526,667	8.48	Mixed
Kansas	220,288	8.06	Mixed

¹ The term "Hispanic" refers to people with a Spanish linguistic, cultural, and historic background only. The term "Latino" includes those with a Lusitanian (Portuguese/Brazilian) linguistic, cultural, and historic background. Most information in this bulletin is based on data published by the US Census Bureau on the Internet.

The Highest concentrations of Mexican Latinos are currently found in:

- California
- Texas
- Arizona
- New Mexico
- Colorado
- Nevada
- Illinois

Together, approximately 27.3 million Latinos live in these seven states that either originated from Mexico and/or still speak some type of Mexican Spanish. That is approximately 68% of all Spanish speakers in the US.

Based on the 2000 US census data the overall picture in 2000 was this:

Hispanic Population by Type: 2000

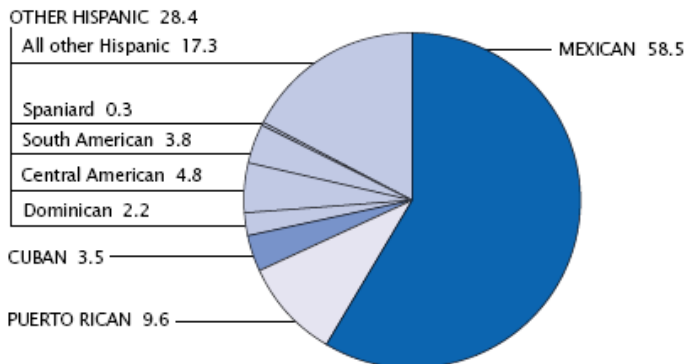
(For information on confidentiality protection, nonsampling error, and definitions, see www.census.gov/prod/cen2000/doc/sf1.pdf)

Subject	Number	Percent
HISPANIC OR LATINO ORIGIN		
Total population	281,421,906	100.0
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	35,305,818	12.5
Not Hispanic or Latino	246,116,088	87.5
HISPANIC OR LATINO BY TYPE		
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	35,305,818	100.0
Mexican	20,640,711	58.5
Puerto Rican	3,406,178	9.6
Cuban	1,241,685	3.5
Other Hispanic or Latino	10,017,244	28.4
Dominican (Dominican Republic)	764,945	2.2
Central American (excludes Mexican)	1,696,937	4.8
Costa Rican	68,588	0.2
Guatemalan	372,487	1.1
Honduran	217,569	0.6
Nicaraguan	177,684	0.5
Panamanian	91,723	0.3
Salvadoran	655,165	1.9
Other Central American	103,721	0.3
South American	1,353,562	3.8
Argentinean	100,864	0.3
Bolivian	42,068	0.1
Chilean	68,849	0.2
Colombian	470,684	1.3
Ecuadorian	260,559	0.7
Paraguayan	8,769	0.0
Peruvian	233,926	0.7
Uruguayan	18,804	0.1
Venezuelan	91,507	0.3
Other South American	57,532	0.2
Spaniard	100,135	0.3
All other Hispanic or Latino	6,111,665	17.3
Checkbox only, other Hispanic	1,733,274	4.9
Write-in Spanish	686,004	1.9
Write-in Hispanic	2,454,529	7.0
Write-in Latino	450,769	1.3
Not elsewhere classified	787,089	2.2

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File 1.

Percent Distribution of the Hispanic Population by Type: 2000

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Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File 1.

In 2000, Mexican Spanish speakers made up just under 60% of all Spanish speakers in the US. Due to the recent increased influx of immigrants from Mexico (about 59% of the growth of the Latino population in the US are estimated to be caused by continued legal immigration), and further due to the high birth rate among Latinos in the US, this number is currently estimated to run at least 70% of the entire Latino population of the US. Since all these data are based on official inquiries and census data, they do not include illegal immigrants.

Next to Mexican Hispanics, those from Puerto Rico constitute the second largest group, which is concentrated mainly in New York (30.8%), Florida (14.2%), New Jersey (10.8%), Pennsylvania (6.7%), Massachusetts (5.8%), Connecticut, Illinois and California. There should be approximately 4.0-4.5 million of them at present.

Cuban Spanish is mostly found in Florida (67%), New York, New Jersey and California.

Spanish as spoken in the Dominican Republic is mainly found in New York (60% +), Florida, and New Jersey.

Clearly, Mexican Spanish is the most spoken version of Spanish in the US, and it is growing. This development may have contributed to the fact that Mexican Spanish has taken over the role of a catch-all Latin American Spanish for Central and South American target groups. This was traditionally the role of Columbian Spanish believed to be the one version of Latin American Spanish closest to Castilian Spanish. Over the past 25 years, not only has Mexican Spanish adopted this role of serving as a generic Latin American Spanish but it has also impacted on the Spanish spoken and written in Spain today, just like American English has taken over the function of an international standard for English from UK English and has influenced the English spoken and written in England.

The differences between the various regional forms of Spanish come to bear much more in spoken Spanish than in written Spanish. And in written Spanish, these differences carry more weight for subject matters such as marketing, advertising, news reporting, and literature than for technical or scientific subject matters. There are significant differences in legal terminology and in certain technical fields such as, e.g., the home construction industry, which in Europe is based on entirely different materials and technologies as compared to the US or most Latin American countries. If the way a house is built is different, the terminology also tends to be different. But in most areas of technology and science, Spanish terms will be the same regardless of regional flavor.

There is also an abstraction called “neutral Spanish”. This academic construct strives to use the terms understood by most Spanish speakers world wide regardless of where the term originated. While this neutral Spanish may be found acceptable in most parts of the Spanish speaking world it also tends to lack flavor, character and distinction. As a general rule we recommend this:

1. Write your English source text as culturally neutral as you can, i.e., do not use language that has specific metaphoric or symbolic meaning in English only and avoid slang, idiomatic speak, and colloquialisms as much as possible since they tend to be harder to translate.
2. If you are targeting a specific group of Spanish speakers – in the US or outside – use the Spanish most of them speak. For example, if you target Hispanics in Florida, use Cuban Spanish. If you target Hispanics in New York, use Puerto Rican Spanish. If you target the Argentinean market, use Argentinean Spanish, etc.
3. Use European Spanish in two cases: A) if you are addressing a European Spanish speaking audience and B) if you target Spanish speaking people worldwide.
4. Use Mexican Spanish in the following cases: A) if you are targeting the Mexican population, or B) if you are targeting Hispanics in the USA in general, or if you are targeting a multitude of South and Central American countries without focus on specific countries.
5. When translating technical, scientific, legal, medical or business documents, use European Spanish, Mexican Spanish, or neutral Spanish.
6. When translating literature, poetry, marketing copy, advertising copy, consumer texts, or other texts on the level of colloquial, idiomatic, or slang speak, or when dealing with subject matters for which a specialized local lingo exists, use the local or regional variant of the Spanish language that may apply.

Consequently, in order to decide on the best-suited version of Spanish and on the most appropriate terminology for your specific purpose a translation provider needs to know what target audience you are addressing with your text, what level of education the readers will have and on what social level you wish to communicate. We recommend that you provide this information together with your source text.