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Author

Murillo, Lous A

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Louis A. Murillo

Professor Emeritus

**Department of Spanish & Portuguese
University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720**

L. A. Murillo

HISPANO / HISPANIC / LATINO

This essay will describe in part the relationship of these three terms in use today: that is, as determined or influenced by the migration in large numbers of nationals from Spanish-speaking countries to the United States after 1980, and in particular to California. My focus on this relationship is, of course, academic, -- reducing a subject or question I know to be complicated -- in historical, demographic, political and sociolinguistic terms -- to a simple description and practical purpose. Beyond my personal views is the greater subject, linking today's usage, particularly in the media, radio, television, press, video, and online, with the past and the future: the cultural history of Spanish as a language spoken and written in California.

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Hispano, hispana (noun and adjective) is Spanish today for “Spanish-speaker” (both within and outside the U. S.) as are its cognates, *hispanohablante, hispanoparlante*. The term has been in use throughout the Spanish-speaking world for centuries; having denoted in earlier times a Spanish national. But for the last two hundred years increasingly any individual from a nation or culture of the Spanish-speaking world and primarily as a linguistic designation.

Example: “¿Es *hispana* la senora de casa ?” -- Does the lady of the house speak Spanish?

“La comunidad *hispana*...” -- The Spanish-speaking community (heard often on televised reporting today).

Historically, *hispano, hispana*, derive from Latin *Hispania*, the Roman name for the Iberian peninsula, as do of course *España*, and *Español*, -- the Spanish language. Latin *Hispania* also provided, in modern Spanish, the adjective *hispanico, -a*, a more ample and learned term than *hispano* and its derivatives, *hispanismo, hispanidad, hispanistas*.

Examples: *los pueblos hispanicos* -- the Hispanic peoples
Asociación Internacional de Hispanistas

It is from Latin also that English has formed *Hispanic* as a comprehensive term for the nations and cultures of the Spanish-speaking peoples.

Examples: The Hispanic Society of America
Hispanic Review, an American scholarly journal
Bulletin of Hispanic Studies, a British journal.

In English there is no other term that can replace or be used in the same comprehensive way to describe the peoples and cultures of the Spanish-speaking world.

The term “Iberian” is a similar term that, however, designates both the speakers of Portuguese in Portugal and Brazil, Spanish nationals and Spanish Americans. In Spanish, *America Latina*, alongside *Hispano America*, *Hispanoamericano*, -a, serve the same purpose, applicable to the nations and peoples of North, Central and South America. ‘Latin America’ ‘Latin American’ or ‘Hispanic America’ / ‘Hispanic American’ are the English terms, of course.

Historically, in English Hispanic has meant, or referred to the nations, peoples, and cultures of the Spanish-speaking world and explicitly as ‘foreign’ and beyond the borders of the U.S. Since about 1950, however, in public life in the U.S. ‘hispanic’ and ‘hispanics’ (adjective and noun) have taken on or become the particular designation of peoples living *within the borders* of the United States, with demographic and political meanings in a formal and official manner for census takers; a population variously described as ‘foreign’ in descent or origin, an ethnoracial minority, or of immigrant and undocumented status, set apart and classified because they are in most cases Spanish (and not English) speakers. In other words, the term Hispanic, beginning about the 1950, has been turned inside out, referring to a *domestic* population in the U.S. For the great majority of this population their native and primary language is Spanish, acquired from birth to childhood and schooling in their homeland and before coming to the U.S. and California.

In this sense, Hispanic in the U.S. has become both an even broader designation for the cultures of the Spanish-speaking world, as well as a more accurate rendition of *hispano*, *hispana* and *hispanoamericano*-a, as a linguistic designation, exclusive of nationality and ethnicity.

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The U. S. Government, federal and state laws, law-makers and law-enforcement and the courts, and both public and private agencies and foundations for social and health services, have recognized, or have been obliged to recognize and re-convert the traditional meaning of Hispanic and address a *domestic* concern or reality, with civil rights a basic question. And banks and businesses have in turn recognized an upcoming market for their services, products, and advertising.

Latino, Latinos, is a journalistic term that attempts to describe and resolve this condition. Supposedly a Spanish word, -- "Latinos" was coined in and for an English-speaking, an 'Anglo', environment. It is an English word, so to speak, like 'Anglo'. It was coined by an elitist corps of journalists writing and speaking English in the Los Angeles area in the 1960s, and thereafter adopted by Spanish-speaking journalists. The sense of the term is not difficult to trace. It derives from *América Latina* and *Latinoamericano* (noun and adjective) It is short for *Latinoamericanos*. As such it claims the legitimacy of 'Anglo'.

The intention was to identify as a group or as a whole a pluralistic minority (composed of long-term, permanent residents and recently arrived immigrants) with an *American* national 'identity' to replace their separate and former national identities, -- Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, or any other from Central or South America, the Caribbean, etc., as well as the usual compounds, Mexican-American, Cuban-American, etc., In this sense it was and remains an ideological stance promoted in large measure by an elite as a political agenda. And 'Latino', 'Latina' are an American cultural 'identity'.

The term 'Latinos' has almost no relevance outside the United States because the citizens of Mexico, Costa Rica, Honduras, or Cuba, Argentina, etc., etc., have their own indisputable national identity to go by, and then there are those native peoples who have preserved their language and culture, quechua, nahuatl, guarani, etc.,

Today, most individuals in the U.S. who prefer or refer to themselves as Latino do so because they don't want to be identified or classified as Spanish-speaking 'inferior aliens', assuming that Hispanic is a disrespectful term at the very least. They may not even think of Spanish as their *lengua materna*. Either they don't speak it well, or not at all, and are indifferent to standards of correct usage, of pronunciation. They have no need to speak it at all with friends or family, or in the workplace. Latino is for them an English word, and *hispano* would be inapplicable. They are content to hearing Spanish and understand it on a familiar level. Or, just as likely, to listen to, or watch, popular programs and music on radio or films on television, newscasts, soccer matches and other sports, "soaps" in Spanish, -- produced and imported from Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Bogotá, even Madrid.

My concern is not the use of 'hispanic' or latino' by English or Spanish speakers or writers in the U. S. today, for this is a question of personal choice, favor, or identity, -- at one end; for business, bank services, or political strategy, at the other. My concern is for the integrity of the Spanish language as it develops here in California in the long run, into the future.

The real question is not terminology but commitment to the use and presence of the Spanish language on the part of *hispanos* living in the U. S. in their daily life, as both a personal and collective expression and communication.

With English the official and dominant language, and Spanish at best with a semi-official status, can the standards of correct usage (even spelling) be maintained in relation to the rest of the Spanish-speaking world? If California and the Southwest become a bi-lingual region of the U. S., in a semi-official, semi-formal way, what strains, -- social, economic, linguistic -- will dominant English continue to impose on popular and commercial usage for the mass of Spanish-speakers, *hispanos*, hispanics?

Which brings me to a major point: one must recognize that the recent huge influx of Spanish-speakers as immigrants, statistically in the millions, to California, Florida, and other regions of the United States, has brought with it the global, socio-technological power of television in Spanish, to be added to radio and the press, with the full force of a cultural amalgamation. In this sense, for the mass electronic media, there are no borders, only borderlands. It is this cultural empowerment of the mass media, I believe, that will determine in so many ways the use of Spanish in our communities, rural or urban, for all levels of income and social groupings, popular or elite, in the foreseeable future.

To the point: what electronic technology provides, produces and advances, from television to the internet and cell phones, is an 'oral' culture where the written word does not predominate, -- oral, voice/picture communication to the exclusion or distortion ('texting') of literacy, the skills of reading and writing. In this oral and hence popular culture the written word -- print, books, newspapers, magazines, play a minor role.

There are today from four to five or six major television channels (foreign or American owned) in Los Angeles broad-casting in Spanish and directed by the hour to the entire Southwest. Directed to a domestic audience and market but imported from Mexico City and other centers abroad; on the level of the latest technology for popular programming, sports, commercials, talk-shows, musical entertainment, "soaps", and newscasts. The great majority of names and voices -- anchors, reporters, actors, actresses, musicians, personalities, celebrities -- are native, even professional, speakers of Spanish, yes, but *imported* (until naturalized), so to speak, for an audience in the U.S. that is non-committal to using Spanish as a native, primary language in every respect, above all educational and intellectual.

Where do we go from here, -- to what future?

III

I close with another fundamental question: what change, or changes, -- demographic, political, economic - - could conceivably bring about a movement to make official, obligatory, the teaching and learning of Spanish as 'native' in all grade schools, urban or rural, across the state of California? And even further, to extend a bi-lingual education through secondary schools in the fields of science, mathematics and engineering? As inconceivable as this may appear today, it is the fundamental change that would recover for Spanish a measure of parity with English in a bi-lingual culture.

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The reverse to this is of course also conceivable in the long run: will or can English become and replace Spanish at all levels as the language of preference, native and primary, for a onetime bi-lingual population of California?

A native language taught to read/write in schools is like the 'infrastructure' to a thriving culture of intellectual and artistic expression. Without a formal and official program of instruction in place, the use of Spanish in California will remain at best a cultural 'importation' even in the eyes and ears and the mind of the peoples who speak and write it, whatever their numbers or political power.