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Varieties of Spanish and Assessment. Linguistic Opinions from English-speakers

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Topic: Opinions on varieties of Spanish language, its teaching and evaluation.

Abstract: This study offers a reflection about evaluating knowledge of the Spanish as a foreign language, and its certification, placing it in relation to the opinions and attitudes of non-native speakers with respect to the diversity of Spanish and with respect to its evaluation and certification.

Keywords: opinions, attitudes, varieties, dialects, Spanish, evaluation, certification

Introduction

Languages present a multiplicity of geographic varieties, or dialects, that must be taken into account when dealing with all aspects of teaching a language, including creation of educational materials, teachers training and of course, evaluation (Wiesse 2007; Moreno Fernández 2007; Acuña, Baralo and Moure 2014). Consequentially, the evaluation and certification of knowledge of a language must value, in one way or another, aspects pertaining to dialectal diversity. This study offers a reflection about evaluating knowledge of the Spanish as a foreign language, and its certification, placing it in relation to the opinions and attitudes of non-native speakers with respect to the diversity of Spanish and with respect to its evaluation and certification.

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Theoretical Fundamentals

To approach the study of opinions relative to the evaluation and certification of foreign languages, it is necessary to have a theoretical basis to facilitate and guide our analysis in addition to simplifying an enormously complicated topic. The theoretical base selected for our purposes has been that used in studies of perception, and more broadly, cognitive linguistics. However, the analysis of language perception requires the theoretic assembly of various models, given that reality is complicated and psychology and social circumstances have as much influence as linguistic units and structures. The theoretic proposals that we will put forth should serve to frame this work which is derived from *perceptual*

dialectology and *cognitive sociolinguistics*, as well as from the study of *linguistic ideologies*. All of these theoretical areas contain the studies of linguistic attitudes that have been considered since the 1970's, (Lambert *et al.* 1960; Giles 1970), including the Spanish language (López Morales 1979; Alvar 1986), while in recent years these areas have become increasingly sophisticated. Yet, let us briefly consider some basic concepts of these theories that will prove to be useful in our analysis.

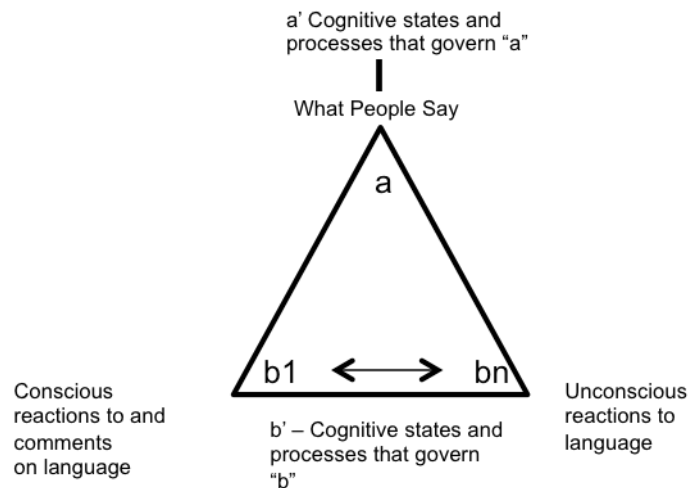
Perceptual Dialectology

Linguistic perception is basically the capacity to receive impressions or previous feelings when using a language. At the same time, the linguistic opinion can be defined as the interpretation that speakers make of the social and geographic positioning of the languages. Perception and opinion are thus overlapping concepts in which access to the linguistic reality and its consequent physical perception is as important as the cognitive and intellectual processing undergone by the speakers listening to their counterpart.

Perceptual dialectology investigates the beliefs of non-linguist speakers about the distribution of linguistic varieties in their respective communities where they are spoken as well as the ways in which such beliefs have been constructed. If we move the object of interest from the perception of varieties to the perception of different languages, we would be in the field of language perception, well separated from general linguistics and even from perceptual linguistics with a gestalt basis (López García 2009).

Like perceptual dialectology, the study of linguistic perception—that is, of different languages, second or foreign—is constructed through a model of linguistic opinion (Preston 1989; 1993; 1999) that distinguishes the cognitive states and processes that govern what people actually say and the states and processes that govern reactions to what people say. At the same time, this dialectology clearly differentiates between the perception of a response to an external stimulus, in the form of a *percept*, and the conception as a result of an internal cognitive process which gives rise to a *concept*. However, between perception and conception there are mutual influences in the transfer of traits that speakers make between different social and linguistic profiles or in the images that the speakers create of their own identity and of the others, including stereotypes (Preston 2010).

Figure 1. Model of Linguistic Opinion. Source: Preston 1989.



On the other hand, perceptual dialectology is included within the field of *folk linguistics*. In agreement with Preston, together with “linguistic theory”—that of linguists—there is a popular theory of language, by which according to popular belief, language is something perfectly real, and an extra-cognitive reality that is external to the individual, platonic and authentic: English, German, Chinese or Spanish exist as realities beyond the use of their speakers. Those speakers that have a direct relationship with these languages (professors, academics, professionals in communications media) make a correct usage of the language—an exemplary usage—although it is permissible to deviate minimally from it. Those speakers who do not have a direct relation with the language make use of a *normal* language. In fact, when attitude surveys ask people about the manner in which they speak, an immense majority of these individuals believe they speak *normally*. The forms of speech that distance themselves from that language often fall either in the category of “dialect”, which is how people from different regions speak, or in the category of “errors”, which is how the speech of foreigners is interpreted. The relation between the real language and its exemplary use are, in a small measure, a natural relationship, so much so that many individuals find it incomprehensible that those who use a “deviant” variety persist in their mistakes, an attitude they have come to interpret as a product of laziness or obstinacy.

Departing from this popular model of language, Preston concludes that there are two arguments or factors which are the ones that come to determine, if not all, the majority of the linguistic attitudes of the speakers: the more or less

(subjectively) pleasurable nature of varieties—their pleasantness—and the correction in their use, especially the latter. If we asked the speakers about what are the traits that more easily allow the identification of a linguistic variety we would find many times in response, “correction”, as the varieties are often valued as more or less correct, in accordance with the hypothesis of *inherent value* and of the *imposed standard* (Giles, Bourhis y Davies 1979; Moreno Fernández 2009). Naturally, according to popular belief, language is alien to the individual and has its own rules that are to be followed as strictly as possible, so the speaker must adjust to its rules and attend to the nearest reference model, which is usually that of the speaker who knows how to handle the “exemplary language” and which, for foreigners, is that of the native speakers.

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The arguments that have just been put forth would be applicable both to native speakers as well as to speakers of foreign languages. In fact, given that most students of a foreign language usually have in their mind a popular model (a popular theory of language), their attitude toward the process and the result of learning can be interpreted in a similar manner to the commentary just made. Among students of foreign languages, usually the aspiration to learn “a normal language” is often quite habitual; on occasion, even, a rejection of the characteristic traits or resources of the exemplary language takes place, under the explanation that one does not wish to “speak like a book”, but to obtain fluid and “normal” communication.

Cognitive Sociolinguistics (Kristiansen 2001; Moreno-Fernández 2017) contributes the idea that all variety is strongly conditioned by the manner in which it is perceived, both by its speakers as well as by users of other varieties or languages, in the contexts in which it is framed. Between the propositions that the cognitive sociolinguist presents in this respect, we are able to highlight the following:

- (a) The perception of the variation of language varieties responds to a process of categorization based on learning.
- (b) The perception of a variety as central or peripheral is related with its cultural, political and economic prestige as well as its history, which leads to the existence of more and less prestigious varieties.

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From a cognitivist perspective, López García (2009) notes that in a language there is a prototypical category in which two essential aspects for teaching and learning stand out. One of these has to do with a cognitive appreciation of the language; the second, with the attitudes towards the language with regards to the prototype, that language symbolize (Moreno-Fernández 2007: 64-65); the third, with the nuclear or peripheral nature of varieties, with regard to a prototype. The first aspect supposes that the speakers make assessments of a language or its varieties such as their linguistic levels: thus, a foreigner could be said to have poor syntax but good phonetics, which indicates the possibility of perceiving the language in a modular way. With regards to the second aspect, it is inevitably

necessary to keep in mind that polycentric languages (Clyne 1992), such as Spanish, are distributed across various territories, more or less known by learners or users of second or foreign languages, although there is usually a coincidence of attitudes regarding the prototype of a given language because it clearly contrasts with the prototypes of other languages. This means that the speakers of foreign languages, in their linguistic awareness, often give more importance to the distance that exists between a language and other languages than they do to the distance that may exist between varieties of the same language.

On the other hand, coming from a domain bordering prototype theory, three levels of categorization have been proposed that merit commentary: the basic level, the superordinate and the subordinate (Cuenca y Hilferty 1999). The basic level is the central and most important in the general process of categorization; the superordinate level includes diverse members and is often inefficient when categorizing; the subordinate discriminates between basic level elements for their attributes, although the process requires greater cognitive effort. From here, one might think that the perception of languages and their varieties as well permit leveling. Thus, as far as the Spanish language and its geolectals are concerned, one is able to think about the existence of a basic level—a prototypical structure—of categories such as *Mexican, Argentine, Chilean*; in the superordinate level — structures with family resemblance— we would encounter categories such as *Andean Spanish* or *Caribbean Spanish* or *Castilian Spanish*, and includes *Spanish of the Americas (español de América)*. In the subordinate level, we would

encounter categories such as *Habanero* (from Havana, Cuba), *Mendocino* (from Mendoza, Argentina), or *Madrileño* (from Madrid, Spain), among many others, with a homogeneity appreciable, although relative, among members of each category.

Likewise, the perception of the dialectal varieties of a language can also be interpreted in accordance with a focal model, also proposed from the cognitive sociolinguistic and that imply knowledge of the dialectal variation of a language in different degrees (Moreno-Fernández 2012b). The focal model—highlighted—proposes a vision of geolectal diversity based on distinct viewpoints that provoke different perceptions of reality. From this model there exist three fundamental types of perception: *monofocal*, *bifocal* and *multifocal*.

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In *monofocal* perception, the most common of the three, the closest and most immediate dialectal reality is appreciated in a subjective form with maximum precision, at the same time that one has a null or scarce vision of the external to their own visual plane: it is myopic vision. The monofocal perception is that of the speaker who scarcely knows other varieties beyond their own and those of their immediate environment; in it there would be a basic level of perception that would correspond with the local and the regional; there would also be a subordinated level of perception that would include adjacent or nearby varieties to the level; and in the subordinated level of perception of the internal varieties of the community or learning group (jargon or vulgar speeches rather than more

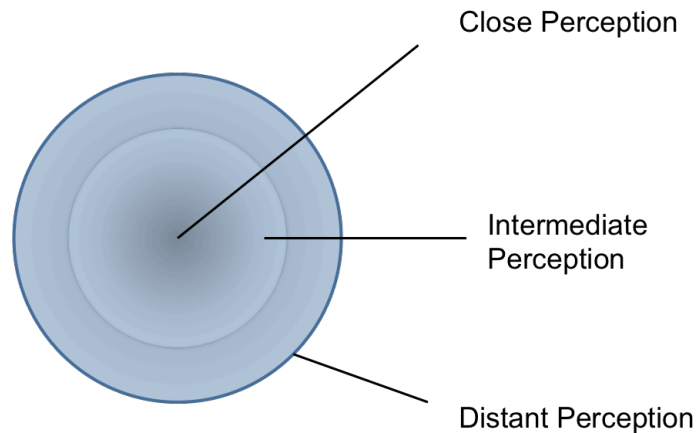
cultured speech or speaking more formally rather than more colloquially). This signifies that, generally, a Spanish speaker with *monofocal perception* is only capable of appreciating the family resemblance of wider Spanish varieties, as well as the subordinated categories that are encountered in a condensed geographic area, yet still barring other intermediate categories: someone from Madrid would perceive a speaker from Nicaragua as ‘Hispanic American’, but would not go any further, yet could distinguish an “Aragonese” from an “Extremenian”, but would have difficulty distinguishing a ‘Bonaerense’ from a ‘Mendocino’ or someone from Havana from a speaker from Santiago de Cuba. For this reason, a monofocal speaker usually considers their modality to be the ‘normal’ while others are dialects off the norm. In fact, those from Madrid, for example might perceive that they are the only individuals that speak without an accent, and of course, do not speak a dialect of Spanish.

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Bifocal perception, of increasing extent, is the ability to perceive both the own geolectal reality and that of speakers from other well-differentiated areas. This occurs when the speaker knows, with detail, other dialectal spaces perhaps because they had lived in one, or perhaps because they had dealt with people from that region. In this case, speakers are able to understand this foreign perception and value it in relation to the their own, with an advantage for one or the other depending on the occurrence in each of their respective historic, social and economic factors as well as prestige. From this perspective, the basic level of

perception can be deemed local, or as in the previous case applicable to an enlarged region.

Figure 2. Model of Linguistic Opinion. Source: Moreno Fernández 2012b.



Finally, *multifocal perception* is that which includes its own immediate modality or next to an indefinite number of other varieties of the same language. The greater the knowledge of other varieties, the greater sensibility that will exist in the perception of dialectal nuances; that is, that perception will be more progressive. In subjective multifocal perception, the speaker is able to perceive the close, intermediate and distant from their own modality. When multifocal perception is objective, the speaker is able to distinguish the relative distances between varieties and their level of similarity, perception that is only available to the best speakers of the language as a whole.

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If we take this focal model to the students or foreign language-users' experience, the interpretation would be parallel, but with differentiating nuances. In

monofocal perception, the varieties of a second or foreign language would not be appreciated, such that one would only have real and perceived experience of the variety with which they were first in contact, if that contact has occurred. This monofocal perception is that of the speaker or learner who barely knows other varieties beyond those which they have encountered in a learning environment or in their immediate environment; in it, there would be a basic level of perception that would correspond with the immediate or local (the teacher's variety/that of one's classmates); there would be a superordinate level of perception that would include varieties adjacent to that that are known, in the case of speakers of a second language, and a subordinate level of perception of the internal varieties of the group, which in the case of students can be determined by the different level of knowledge of the language of the co-learners and, in the case of the speakers of a second language, by the possible contact with native speakers.

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A *bifocal perception* implies the capacity to perceive that what is learned or known provides a variety of a language, offering broader possibilities, either by contact with advanced learners or with native speakers of distant origins. In this case, the speaker (or learner) is capable of understanding a foreign variety and valuing it in relation with one's own, with an advantage for one or the other depending on the level of knowledge of the language and of the values associated or presupposed in each variety. Finally, *multifocal perception* would include its own modality (acquired through learning or in natural contexts) together with an indefinite number of other varieties of the same language. In

speakers of foreign languages, multifocal perception is usually subjective, not objective, when it comes to perceiving the near, the intermediate, and the distant to the acquired modality.

Linguistic Ideologies

Linguistic ideologies could be defined as representations, explicit or implicit, of the intersection between language and the human being in a social world. For Kathryn Woolard (1998), linguistic ideologies establish bridges between linguistics and social theory, between the microculture of communicative action and the political and social components of social power, thereby connecting macrosocial factors to linguistic behavior and contextualized discourse (Purvis y Hunt 1993; Siegel 2006; Van Dijk 1999, 2003; Faircolugh 2003; Kroskirty 2004).

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To interpret the fundamental theories relative to the linguistic ideologies, one must start with the idea that the languages (first, second and foreign) tend to be perceived more by their ideologies than by their internal structures. The notions of *language*, *orthography*, or *grammar*, are linked to those of authenticity, development, power and tradition. However, ideology is not implicit in the use of language, but is part of the *metalanguage*, not of the language itself. On the other hand, the ideologies about international languages are often based on the improbability of the existence of heterogeneous communities and the naturality of homogenous communities (Blommaert & Verschueren 1998). Plous (1993;

2003) has explained that the external tends to perceive itself by its homogeneity while internal heterogeneity is often prioritized.

Linguistic ideologies can make themselves manifest through opinions that implicate the existence of processes of discriminatory learning and social categorization. This categorization produces two automatic effects: first, distortion of perception so that the similarity of the intragroup and differences among the intergroup are accentuated, while evaluative and behavioral discrimination favors the intergroup. On the other hand, if categorization involves the accentuation of some features, this accentuation leads to stereotyping. Traditionally, stereotypes are conceived as an exaggerated belief associated with a category, in such a way that it leads to a simplification and order where there is complexity and variation. Stereotypes are a functional cognitive mechanism by which we systematize our social environment, creating different categories that are apparently homogenous, exaggerating the differences between elements of distinct categories and minimizing the differences between members of the same category. In a way, the process of forming stereotypes can be interpreted as a case of metonymy.

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Finally, analysis of the linguistic ideologies must bear in mind that these are usually a relevant component of and in the institutions of power. The Marxist sociologist, Antonio Gramsci [2004] explained this reality by means of the concept of *hegemony*, which would be the capacity to impose a world view on

behalf of the social groups with power or capacity for it. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1991) preferred to speak of *symbolic power* and defined it as the capacity to confirm or to transform a world view, an ability that is not exercised if it is not recognized and is based on the belief of the legitimacy of words and those who pronounce them. Definitely, teaching can be interpreted as a system from which a symbolic power is exercised on the part of those who organize and direct it, which it is evident in all the components and phases of the teaching-learning process: the teachers, the programs, the assessment and consequentially, certificates. In this way, teaching is an instrument of symbolic power, with an undeniable ideological base, as some of its instruments are considered to be fundamentals: the norms, rules, exams, grades and certificates.

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Objectives and Methodology

With this theoretical background put forth, the intention of our study is to know what is the opinion of potential candidates for any certificate of Spanish in relation to the geolectal varieties, as well as their relevance for their evaluation and for the certificates themselves. The specific background in this line of study, as far as Spanish is concerned, is scarce. To the most recent studies of linguistic attitudes in non-Hispanic bilingual environments (Achugar y Pessoa 2009), one could add other work that values the linguistic variation in the teaching of Spanish as an international language (Arteaga y Llorente 2009; Monerris 2015), but in none of them is attention paid to language assessment and certification.

In order to fulfill our main objective, we have gathered the opinions of non-native Spanish speakers coming from three predominately Anglophone areas: The United States, The United Kingdom and Australia. The specific objectives that we have proposed are the following:

1. To know the perception of potential candidates pursuing certification of Spanish as a foreign language on the dialectal reality of the Spanish language.
2. To know the perception of non-natives on the varieties of Spanish, in terms of correction, usefulness in international communication and pleasantness.
3. To know the relevance granted for those who are non-native to different varieties of Spanish in terms of their presence or consideration in certificates of language knowledge.

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To reach these objectives, it is essential to have adequate analytical tools that we believe can be encountered in the cognitivist paradigm, both in the conceptual proposals of perceptual dialectology as in cognitive sociolinguistics, as we have seen. Then, an interpretation of the results we obtain will be addressed from cognitivism, as well as from the field of linguistic ideologies, especially from its social and anthropological dimension.

This research has consisted in gathering the opinions of non-native Spanish speakers residing in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia in

relation with the objectives and aspects discussed. The principal reason to procure respondents from these countries is that these are mainly Anglo, English-speaking territories in which, thus, the proportion of English speakers is higher. Thus, this paper works with the opinions of the English-speaking population because of two reasons: initially, because currently a significant proportion of students or potential candidates of Spanish language certifications are English-speakers—either as a first or second language—if one takes into account the world-wide diffusion of the English language. Secondly, we have wanted to work with a linguistic profile that is relatively homogenous such that diversity of cultural origins and linguistics will not make the analysis impossible. Together with these methodological reasons, other technical ones have been taken into account, yet are of no small relevance. In order to conduct surveys that allow us to know the opinion of people from anywhere in different countries, it is necessary to get powerful tools, resources that at the moment are especially qualified for the English language and for English-speaking countries and not for other linguistic spaces. The tool which has served us in this analysis of the opinions regarding Spanish certificates is called *SurveyMonkey*, specifically a service known as *Audience*.

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SurveyMonkey is an online survey service, headquartered in the United States and created in 1999, whose usage shot-up in 2009 to currently exceed 15 million users worldwide. *SurveyMonkey*'s service permits a user to create their own surveys and facilitate their distribution by means of email, electronic forms and



social media. The data yielded by the questionnaires are collected in the application itself, within which they can be obtained in different formats to facilitate analysis. Once the questionnaire is drawn-up, the *Audience* service offers the possibility of reaching more than 30 million potential respondents in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. The analyst is offered the possibility of specifying the information required by the survey, the number of responses required as well as the time necessary to gather the surveys. From these requirements, *SurveyMonkey* formulates a budget of expenses that charges the interested party and distributes the surveys among the respondents. The questionnaires are filled-in by numerous devices, including desktops, laptops, tablets and smartphones.

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For the study concerning the opinion of potential candidates of Spanish-language certificates about the diversity of the Spanish-language, I have worked with three samples corresponding to each of the aforesaid countries. The number of completed questionnaires was 110 in the United States, 100 in the United Kingdom and 51 in Australia. The reason that Australia demonstrated half of the respondents as other countries is the high number of dropouts in the survey, dropouts that are not due to poor design of the questionnaire (seeing as it operated smoothly in the United States and the United Kingdom with an error of less than 10%) but rather, a lack of identification with the circumstances and criteria presented in the survey, resulting in more respondents being alien to Spanish, its study and the language's international presence. The participants in

the poll did not need to meet any requirements other than that both sexes be represented, that all respondents are older than 18 and that they are distributed among the countries in question. Naturally, apart from this information, the survey solicited information about other relevant aspects of the respondents' profiles, such as the following: first language, level of education, possible Spanish studies, degree of familiarity with the Spanish language (if it were the case) and certificates of Spanish held (if applicable).

Table 1. Samples' characteristics per country.

<p><i>United States Sample</i></p> <p>Date: 06/30/2016 Completed Surveys: 110 Sex: Men: 45% / Women: 55% Age: 18-29: 19% / 30-44: 26% / 45-60: 36% / >60: 19% Level of Education: Primary School: 10.4% / High-School: 14.2% / College: 40.6% / Post-graduate: 21.7% / More than Post-graduate: 13.2% First Language: English: 95.3% / Chinese: 1.9% / Other: 2.7% Previously Studied Spanish: Yes: 73.6% / No: 26.4% Obtained certification in Spanish: Yes: 2% / No: 98%</p> <p>Region of the United States: New England: 8.6% / Mid-Atlantic: 18.1% / Central Northeast: 15.2% / Central Northwest: 5.7% / South Atlantic: 15.2% / Central Southeast: 9.5% / Central Southeast: 11.4% / Mountains: 7.6% / Pacific: 8.6%</p>	
<p><i>United Kingdom Sample</i></p> <p>Date: 07/01/2016 Completed Surveys: 100 Sex: Men: 46% / Women: 54% Age: 18-29: 23% / 30-44: 23% / 45-60: 34% / >60: 20% Level of Education: Primary: 13.9% / Secondary School: 27.7% / College: 24.8% / Post-graduate: 20.8% / More than Post-graduate: 12.9% First Language: English: 86.1% / Arabic: 3% / Other European Language: 8,9% / Other Languages: 2% Previously Studied Spanish: Yes: 41.6% / No: 58.4% Obtained certification in Spanish: Yes: 9% / No: 91%</p> <p>Region of the UK: East: 14% / East-Central: 11% / London: 20% / North: 11% / Northern Ireland: 2% / Scotland: 5% / South: 22% / Wales: 1% / West-Central: 6% / Yorkshire and The Humber: 8%</p>	

Australia Sample

Date: 06/30/2016

Completed Surveys: 51

Sex: Men: 47% / Women: 53%

Age: 18-29: 20% / 30-39: 31% / 40-59: 33% / >60: 14%

Level of Education: Primary School: 5.8% / Secondary School: 25.4% /

College: 15.6% / Post-Graduate: 25.4% / More than Post-Graduate: 27.4%

First Language: English: 88.2% / French: 3.9% / Portuguese: 1.9% /

Italian: 1.9% / Other Languages: 3.8%

Previously Studied Spanish: Yes: 17.6% / No: 82.3%

Obtained Certification in Spanish: No: 100%

Region of Australia: Capital: 3.9% / New South Wales: 17.6% / North: 3.9% / Queensland: 23.5% / South: 15.6% /

Tasmania: 1.9% / Victoria: 29.4% / West: 3.9%

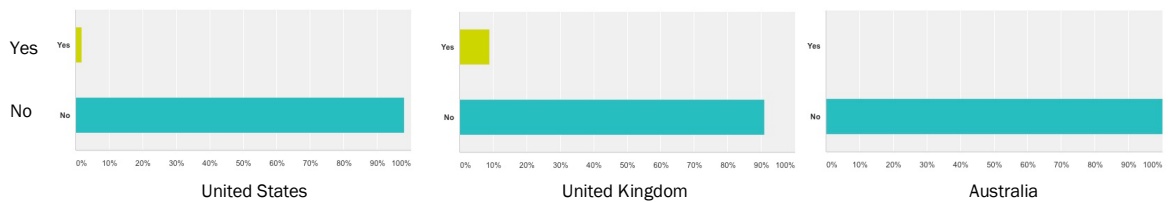


The profiles of the respondents who sent their responses through the *SurveyMokey* system coincide in some traits and diverge in others. The coincidence is observed in a slight predominance of women relative to men, among the age groups of 30-45 years-old and 45-60 years old, and among those respondents with average income and completed university studies. At first, these characteristics are suitable to consult the opinions regarding the learning of Spanish as a foreign language and linguistic certification, given that access to the study and to language certificates implies not only familiarity with the process of teaching, but also a minimum economic capacity and expectations about sociolaboral activity. The coincidence between respondents, also, is notable in terms of the mother tongue, as intended, given that the grant majority of the respondents are native English-speakers in a proportion exceeding 86%; the remaining percentage is reflective of the ethnic and demolinguistic diversity of the countries. Likewise, the three countries coincided in the low percentage of Spanish language certificates obtained. In Australia, this percentage is null, probably for the short tradition of speaking Spanish and its low significance as a

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foreign and second language. In the United States, the percentage barely reaches 2% despite the ample diffusion of the teaching of Spanish, because of the relative utility awarded to titles and certificates, often subordinate to direct demonstration of skills. The percentage is somewhat higher in the United Kingdom (9%), probably for the larger culture of certification that exists in this country relative to language ability, including the English language.

Figure 3. Do you hold a Spanish language certificate?



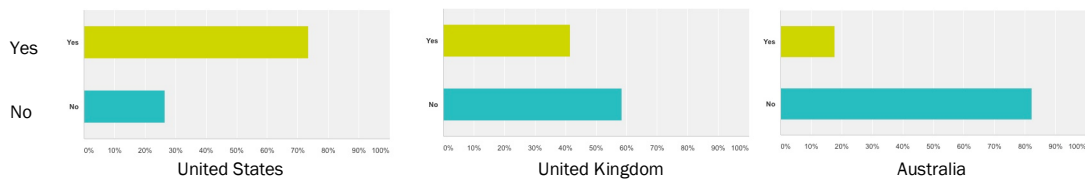
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The discrepancies between our samples are primarily manifest in knowledge of the Spanish language and in the expressed experiences in relation to the certification of Spanish. In this case, while 73% of the members of the U.S. sample affirm they have learned or studied Spanish, those from the United Kingdom demonstrated 46% and Australia, 17%. Familiarity with Spanish, thus, is very disparate among the three countries, which is explained by the historical and demographical configuration of each country.

The United States exhibits a Hispanic population greater than 55 million, which is about 18% of the population. Such an important ethnic group has made interest in the language among non-Hispanics very large; in fact, more than 90% of

Secondary schools in the United States offer programs of Spanish language. The situation in the United Kingdom is distinct. Here, Spanish is the third most-known foreign language (8%), after French (23%) and German (9%), yet is considered to be one of the most useful (34%). With regards to Australia, the Spanish-speaking community is comprised of approximately 100,000 people and the education system of the country has not been conducive to the continued study of foreign languages. With regards to its teaching, Spanish is growing at a good rate (80% between 1994 and 2005), although preferences tend to lean toward the study of Chinese.

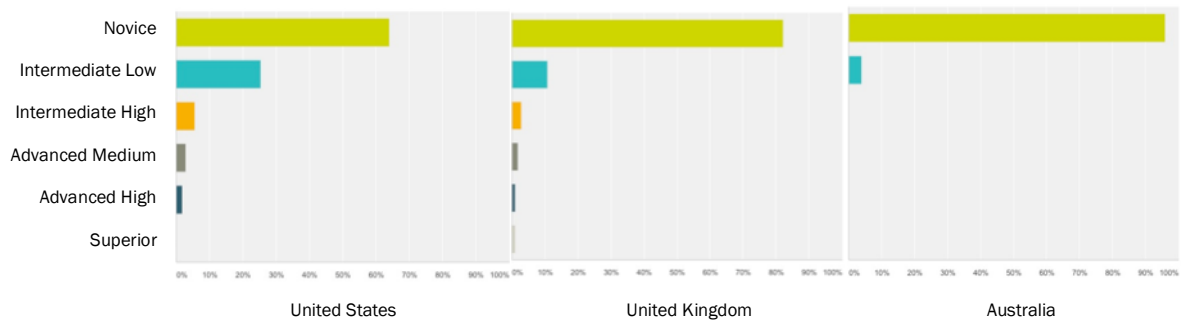
Figure 4. Have you studied or learned Spanish?



In relation to knowledge of Spanish, the historical, demographic and linguistic repertoire differences between the three countries justifies each's particularities. While declaring a knowledge of Spanish beyond a learner level is greater than 70% in the United States, in the case of the United Kingdom is around 40% and below 20% in Australia. Naturally, knowledge of Spanish to which the respondents refer is also disparate, the highest average being that of the United States, followed by that of the United Kingdom. The Australian respondents, when they know Spanish, do not know more than a low-intermediate level, excluding

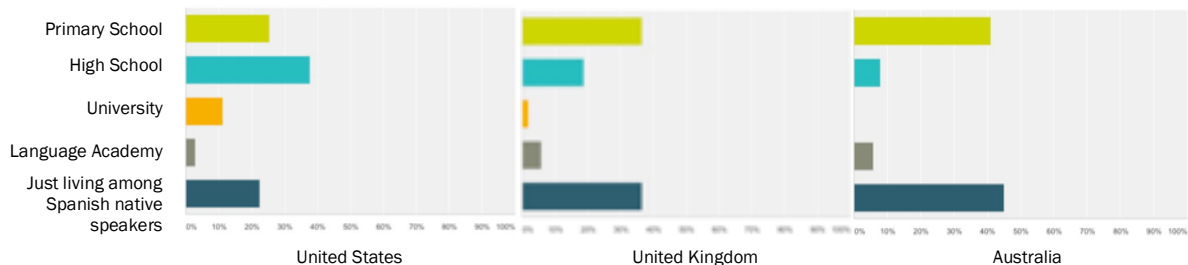
native speakers. In any case, because of its status as a foreign language (or second language in the United States) the predominant level of knowledge and use of the Spanish language is that of a beginner, with a proportion around 95% in the case of Australians.

Figure 5. If you have studied or learned Spanish, what is your level of knowledge?



The answers about where one has learned or studied Spanish are quite interesting as they reveal significant coincidences and discrepancies. So, although Primary school appears to be an important environment for learning Spanish- for those who have had the opportunity to study it, it is not the most conducive environment for this purpose.

Figure 6. Where did you learn Spanish?



In Australia, the most frequent form of learning is that which occurs among native speakers, given the precarious conditions of the educational offerings of Spanish as a foreign language in this country. In the United Kingdom, almost two-thirds of those that know Spanish have learned it in a teaching environment. The United States, where 75% of the respondents have learned the language in academic environments (the non-native speakers), show a greater importance in High-school, similar to College, for learning Spanish, while the incidence of private language schools is very small in all three countries.

Certificates and Linguistic Varieties

The content of the questionnaire submitted to our international respondents was written in English, for obvious reasons, and was constructed taking into account some of the fundamental theories already presented. Firstly, in agreement with the principles of cognitivism, it was taken into account the notion that reality can be perceived and later categorized into different levels. This means accepting, as we have seen, that around the central level of categorization, exists a

superordinate level, less discriminatory of features, and a subordinate level, that supports more discrimination. The less discriminatory superordinate level is a simplification of reality, while the subordinate highlights the complexity of a given reality. In the redaction of the questions from our survey, we have managed to establish central, superordinate and subordinate categories, in order to allow the reflection of the sensitivity in the perception by the informants. On the other hand, the cognitivist theory has the concept of the prototype as one of its basic components. In general, languages are perceived as prototypical categories that can be linked to several varieties of a language. This fact is decisive in order to interpret perceptions and categorizations of the varieties of a language. In the same way, together with the prototypes can appear other mechanisms of categorization, more or less related to the prototype, such as traits and exemplars.

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The traits are particular linguistic facts whose presence or absence is able to determine the assignment of an element (a language, a variety) to a determined category. The exemplars are units or individuals that allow associating an element to a determined category, so that a speaker can associate a variety with the way it manifests in a speaker or in a determined exemplar. In the case of foreign language learners, a professor can function as an “exemplar” to which a given variety is associated, such it is not uncommon for such an exemplar, as the speaker of a variety, to be the only one known by students. The other similar exemplars that are known will be associated with the same category.

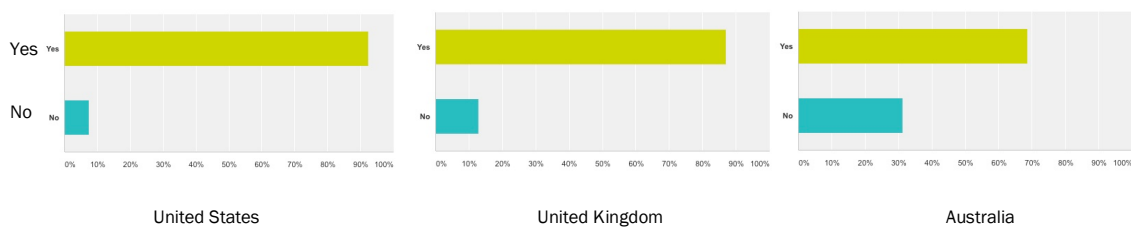
In our questionnaire as well, we have considered the principles of the popular linguistics referred to the special sensitivity of the speakers to two characteristics of the linguistic uses: its correction (linked to the “ideology of the standard”) and its pleasantness. Research has also been cautious in the field of linguistic ideologies and with the scope of the symbolic power of the entities and processes linked to the teaching of languages. Given that the hegemonic or the symbolic can be conceived as prototypical, this research strives to not present specific educational realities that can bias the perceptions: so, the universities or the certificates have been treated as generic entities, not in their concrete forms avoiding the explicit appointment of any of them. Thus, being that the handled respondents are not Spanish speakers, or at least are not native Spanish speakers, specific references to certificates, studies and universities in Spanish-speaking areas have been omitted, given that they do not need to be universally known and may introduce interpretive biases, leading to negative consequences for the analysis. Within the questionnaire, the questions relating to linguistic opinions have been organized in three sections, although they are not externally identified as such. The first section is oriented to collect perceptions on the linguistic diversity internal to the Spanish-speaking community. It includes several questions concerning the existence of varieties, the knowledge of varieties, and their possible recognition both in the spoken and written language. The second section is interested in the perception of the varieties of Spanish in relation with the concepts of correction and pleasantness, to which the concept of usefulness for international communication has been added, being very present in relation to

the study of foreign languages. Finally, the third section is specifically interested in certification and includes three questions referring to the type of certificates that is preferred, to the necessity of linking certificates to specific varieties and to the preference for a given country, as the issuer of the certificate.

Section 1: Opinions on the diversity of the Spanish-speaking community

The first question of this section is simple and direct: “do you believe that Spanish has multiple varieties or dialects?” One is able to think that this is an obvious question, and therefore, without interest, but here is where the modes of perception and the possibilities offered by a focal theory enter. Generally, we consider those further from us to be more homogenous, which supposes the adoption of a monofocal perception when interpreting an unknown linguistic reality. Recall that the respondents are non-native Spanish speakers immersed in an English-speaking context.

Figure 7. Do you consider Spanish to have multiple varieties or dialects?

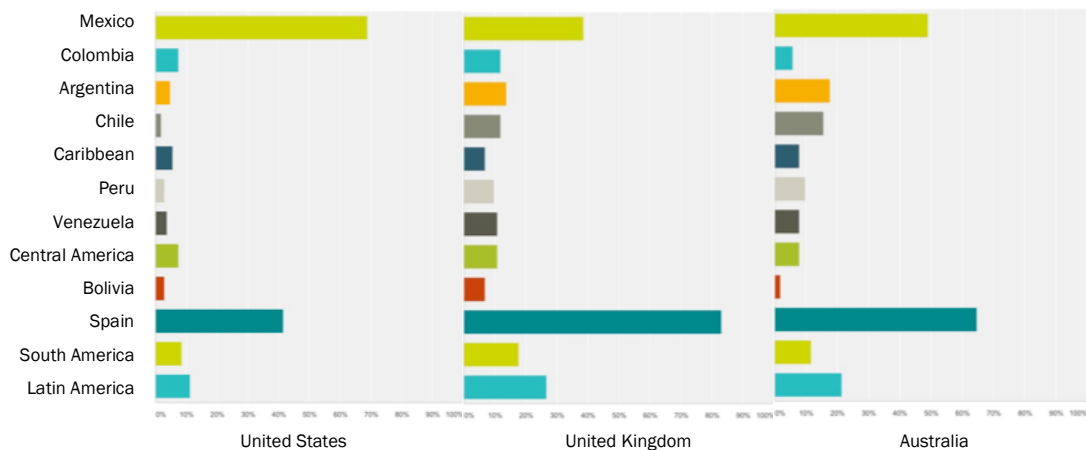


The obtained responses in our three countries of reference agree about the recognition of the multiplicity of Spanish varieties; it is not for nothing that the United States and the United Kingdom are in contact with a large contingent of

Spanish speakers from diverse backgrounds. We observe, nevertheless, that the more apparent remoteness there is with respect to the Hispanic community, the less dialectal diversity is recognized. In the case of Australia, almost a third of the respondents consider Spanish to not have dialects while only 8% of those from the U.S. have not perceived this diverse reality, probably those living in areas with a low Hispanic population.

When concerned with recognizing varieties of Spanish, the three samples offer common guidelines, although with significant differences. Common guidelines are the clearest recognition of the Spanish of Spain and, secondly, of the Spanish of Mexico. In the case of the United States, for reasons of geographic continuity and of internal demographics, Mexican Spanish has a more prominent profile than the Spanish of Spain. In the United Kingdom, as in Australia, the affirmation of having knowledge of the Spanish of Spain, in the first case as well as by geographic proximity, is the one that shows a greater frequency.

Figure 8. What varieties of Spanish do you know?



The varieties of Spanish have already been identified and described in other works, so it is not appropriate now to put forth their description or other types of valuations (Moreno Fernández 2007, 2016; Moreno Fernández y Otero 2016). In relation with the varieties that our informants say they know or can recall, the panorama that they present is extremely interesting. On the one hand, one would be able to talk about the existence of two prototypes of Spanish (that of Spain and that of Mexico) that are internationally more relevant in terms of their perception and categorization. On the other hand, it is significant that the two subcategories such as *South America* or *Latin America* have, together, more relevance than any category pertaining to a specific country, with the exception of the two aforementioned examples. This brings us to a simplified vision of the reality, for which there is an appreciable homogeneity while closeness shows diversity. One is also able to discuss the existence of a bifocal vision where there exists some prototypes and in front of them, some simplified superordinate categories, among which include *Central America* and the *Caribbean*. Lastly, among the rest of the mentioned countries, the greatest frequency of mentions belonged to Colombia in the United States, Colombia, Argentina and Chile for those in the U.K. and Argentina and Chile for the Australians. Probably, the perception of Spanish of those countries is linked to the demography of the Hispanic population in each of the countries and the strength of bilateral relations among them.

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As a complement to these opinions regarding the more well-known varieties of Spanish, the survey included two more questions, relating to the recognition of such varieties in the spoken language and in the written language.

Figure 9. Do you recognize varieties of Spanish when you hear them?

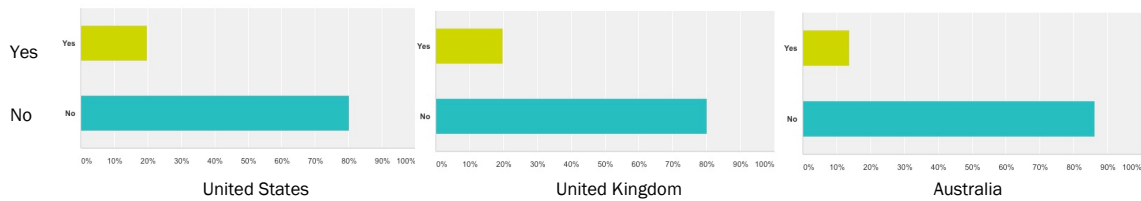
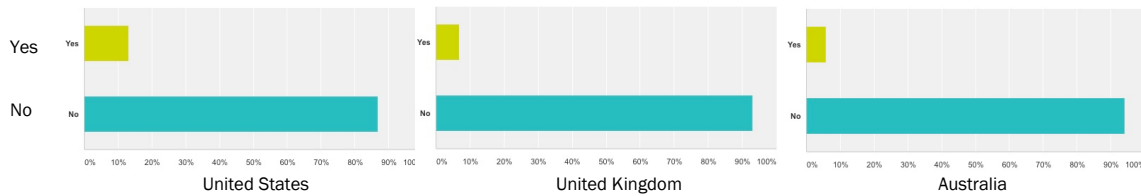


Figure 10. Do you recognize varieties of Spanish when you read them?



The responses reveal some findings that are usually made evident among native speakers for easily explained reasons. Firstly, despite the acceptance of varieties in the language and despite having identified them, giving a prominent place to two prototypical modalities, the majority of the respondents affirm that are not able to recognize them neither in the spoken nor in the written language. This fact acts as evidence that perceptions, categorizations and opinions on reality can exist even when they are not directly recognized, but through training or information received, cultural stereotypes or discriminatory learning. Curiously,

the degree of lack of recognition of the varieties of the spoken language shows no striking difference between the three countries, although there are some that are more recognized in the written language. Secondly, the fact that has just been discussed in written language ensures that it should not be surprising if one starts with an ideology of the standard by which standardization singularly affects writing, where differences which in speech are usually made explicit, tend to be neutralized.

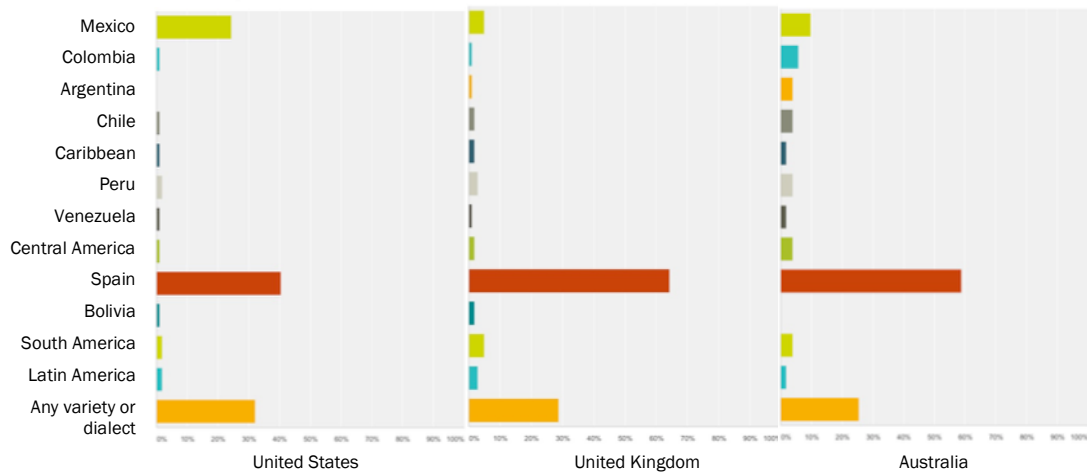
Section 2: Opinions about varieties of Spanish

As has been noted, the popular theories of linguistics or, if preferred, popular linguistics, have served as a base to the three questions. The question, “what variety of Spanish do you consider to be the most correct?” bring us to the some of the highest categorizations. The most relevant answers believed that Spanish from Spain should be viewed as being preeminent, with Spanish from Mexico in second place, a positioning that is observed even in the United States. Those answers tell us about the perception of Spanish from Spain as a prototype of correctness, which within the ideology of the standard it is supposedly equivalent to a prototype of legitimacy and historicity. This fact, with everything thus-far considered, does not reveal anything new pertaining to widely-held international opinions. More interesting is the recognition of any other variety of Spanish, from whichever country, with a higher percentage than that of Mexico. The picture that this answer gives us is that the three analyzed English-speaking countries consider a well-identified prototype regarding correction, which corresponds to

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Spanish from Spain; outside the prototype, any other variant could be valid, inclusive of those from the United States. We think that for many Spanish speakers from the United States, the Spanish from Mexico is a popular variety yet perhaps vulgar, reflecting the poor social consideration received by the Mexican population (Calleja Fernández 2005).

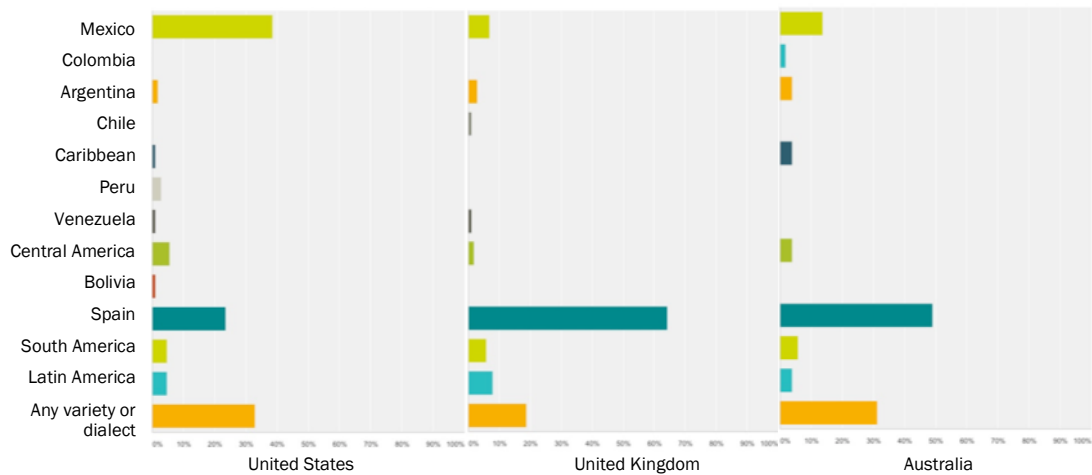
Figure 11. What variety of Spanish do you consider to be the most correct?



The interpretation is different when we move away from the ideology of the standard and situate ourselves in the plane of international communication. Here we discovered several facts of interest. Firstly, that those from the United States consider Mexican Spanish to be the most useful variety. If it's about communicating with a multiplicity and diversity of interlocutors, Mexican Spanish is the most useful, greater than the value attributed to the Spanish of Spain whose perception is weaker than that of the value attributed to any variety of the language. The United Kingdom and Australia, nevertheless, perceive Spanish

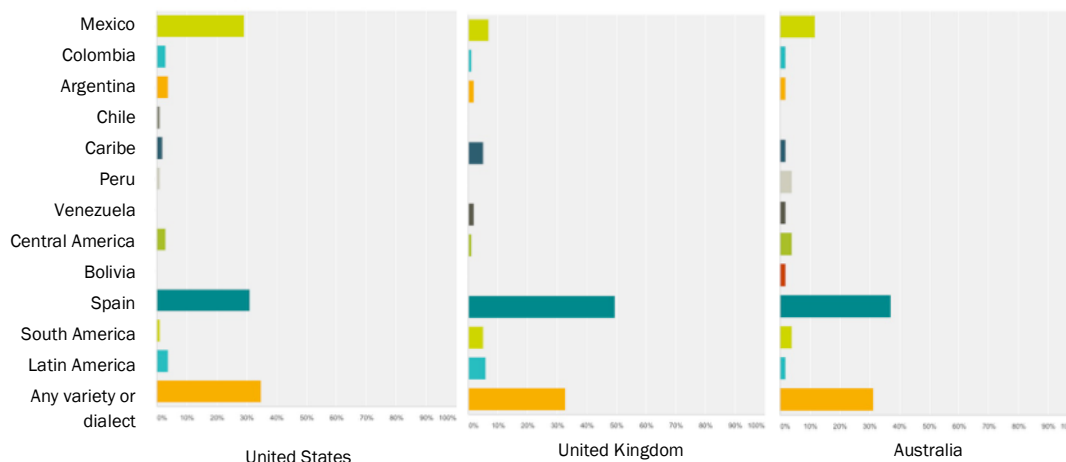
from Spain as the variety most highlighted with regards to international communication, and in both cases any variety of Spanish is valued, although as a secondary option.

Figure 12. Which variety of Spanish do you consider to be the most useful for international communication?



Finally, the perception of the pleasantness offers a similar profile regarding usefulness in the context of international communication, although in this case the three countries they grant preeminence to the Spanish from Spain.

Figure 13. Which variety of Spanish do you consider to be the nicest?



In the United States, the generic category, “any variety” shows a higher percentage than the Spanish of Spain and even that of the Spanish from Mexico. One more time, this perception could be interfered by a non-linguistic generalization about the social valuation of the Mexican population as a whole.

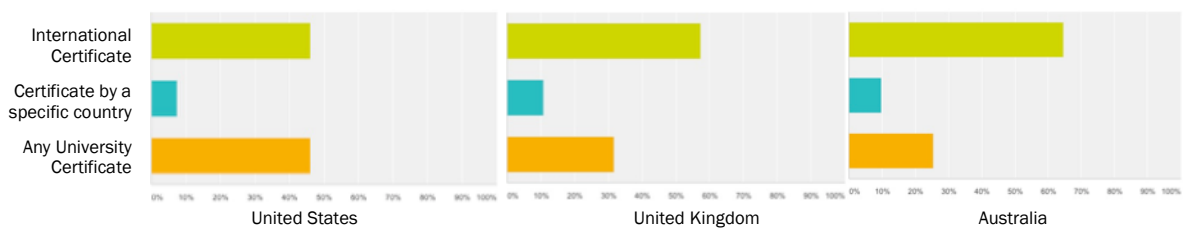
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Section 3: Opinions on varieties in Spanish certificates

The first question referred specifically to certificates, with particular interest to the type of preferred certification, offered three possibilities: an international certificate, a certificate from a specific country, or a university certificate. Of the three options, the least selected of the three samples, is that referring to a specific country, a fact that points to a greater appreciation of the international over the national in the context of demographic movements and globalization. On the other hand, the university option is, alongside the international option, the most selected among those from the United States, which understandably, find

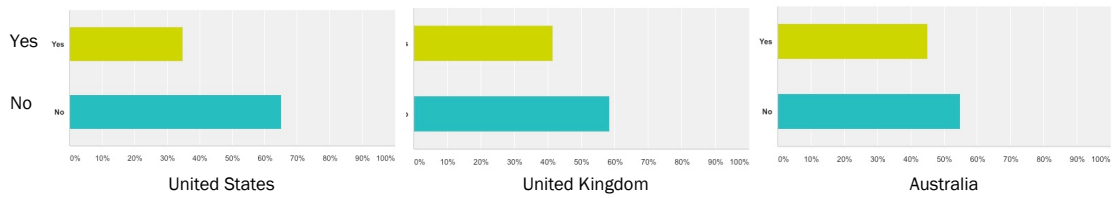
the university to be a common place to learn Spanish. These responses point to the progressively increasing value of international applicability, simultaneously to the institutional and symbolic weight of the university in the realm of teaching, including that of languages, among those being Spanish.

Figure 14. What type of certificate do you prefer?



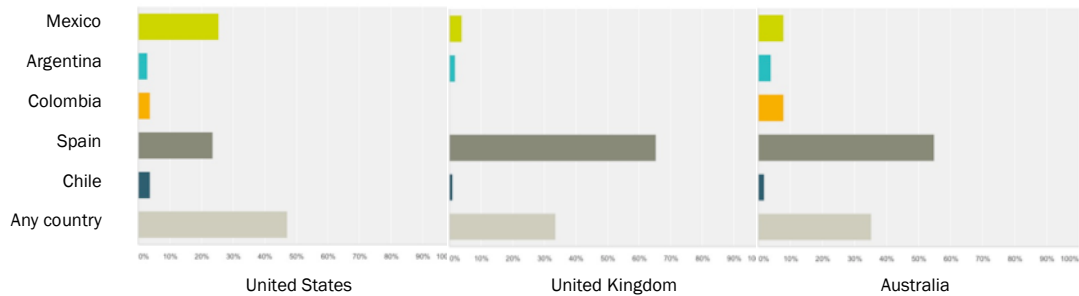
The second question from this section refers to the necessity that the certificate is linked specifically to a given variety of Spanish. In the three samples, the predominant result is “No”, although the percentage is reduced in the U.K. sample in relation to the U.S. sample and in Australia respective to the U.K. sample. The opposite happens with “Yes”, occurring in the United States where a reference to a specific variety of Spanish gets less support. These responses point to the priority granted by non-native speakers to certificates of the language as a central prototypical category against the possible relevance of one of its varieties, varieties that, as has been mentioned, are often not neither perceived nor discriminated against.

Figure 15. Do you believe that certificates should refer to a specific variety of Spanish?



Finally, the informants are required to select a Spanish-speaking country as an issuer of a certification, for which they have been presented a brief list of the countries that offer the most well-known Spanish certificates or diplomas (Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, Chile, and Spain) in addition to the “any country” Spanish-speaking option.

Figure 16. I would prefer a Spanish certificate from...



The received answers regarding the certificates point in the same direction as the opinions concerning Hispanic dialectal diversity and concerning the perception of these varieties. In the case of the United States, the most selected option is that which refers to any Spanish-speaking country, followed by the option pertaining to Mexico, and in third, Spain. This situation offers a bifocal or multifocal vision of

the diversity with regards to certification, probably owing to the internal diversity of the Hispanic contingent in the United States, where the Mexican-American demographic stands out.

The panorama, nevertheless, is very distinct in the United Kingdom and in Australia, where a prototype (in this case, the certification of Spanish) prevails. That prototype leaves in a secondary place of desirability the certifications from any other country, taken in their singularity or in conjunction with another, which reflects a monofocal vision where a category receives preeminence while the others are blurred in conceptual difference.

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Variation and certification of languages

The survey, internationally-distributed with the purpose of knowing the opinions of non-native speakers regarding the varieties of Spanish and its preeminence in the context of assessment and certification, reveals some facts with great clarity, among those which highlight the following:

- a) The diversity of opinions proceeding from different contexts.
- b) The interpretation of the Spanish language from an ideology of the standard, that gives priority to the Spanish of Spain, especially regarding the criterion of correctness.
- c) The significant relevance of Mexico, above all in the United States, being, together with Spain, the sole category of country of noted relevance.

- d) The tendency to simplify and homogenize the dialectal reality among those with less knowledge of it, with predominance to a monofocal vision.
- e) The appearance of non-monofocal visions when a diversity of Spanish-speakers is closer.
- f) The significant identification of superordinate categories referring to collective varieties: Latin American, Central American, Caribbean.

These results derive from a quantitative analysis and could be placed in relation to the recent initiative of the *Servicio Internacional de Evaluación de la Lengua Española* (SIELE) to demonstrate the success of the initiative. This is a Spanish-American certification initiative, launched in Spain and in Mexico, the two countries recognized as prototypes among Anglo-Saxons; this is an international initiative in an environment in which internationalization is positively valued; this is an initiative in which the Spanish-speaking community is valued as a whole, recognizing the relative importance of each and every one of the countries of which it is comprised and the resulting linguistic varieties; finally, this is an initiative in which the universities fulfill a fundamental function, with which SIELE recognizes the importance given to the university.

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Then, even though the SIELE seems to respond to the vision about varieties of Spanish that exist among the Hispanic countries and to the way in which diversity is recognized within the certifications, this international service cannot fall into the error of adopting a vision or opinion coincident and identified with those of a

population alien to the linguistic reality of Spanish and foreign to the function of international certification. In other words, any certification -much more as an international service of evaluation- cannot be construed from the foundations of popular linguistics, but rather, from a sound and scientific linguistic and pedagogical theory.

We start from a simple, but fundamental reality: that linguistic variation, including the dialectal, is an essential fact in the language that cannot be overlooked or marginalized in its teaching, not in none of the processes which this implies. From a very general perspective one can affirm that diversity is important in relation to education because: 1) a lack of exposure can limit learning; 2) marginalizing varieties, in general is counterproductive; 3) the differences are part of the community identity. These facts are particularly relevant regarding the teaching of the mother tongue (Heros 1999, 2008), in children's contexts, but in one way or another, they also manifest themselves in educational environments, including those of foreign languages. Diversity then is a fundamental question facing language professors, creators of programs, authors of manuals, as well as examiners, and by the same reasoning, examiners, testers, and certification authorities. To adequately understand the complexity of the subject, it is sufficient to contrast the diversity of any language with the simplicity in the practice of an "ideology of the standard", often implicit in the whole process of teaching, including that of foreign languages.

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Crystal, Fletcher and Garman (1976) explain that the prescriptive approach, the foundation of the ideology of the standard, is inherent in the design of programs, syllabi, tests and exams, and that this approach entails a simplification of linguistic structures, a characteristic of the majority of the popular doctrine of correction. This doctrine of correction is that which underlies the elaboration of many linguistic tests utilized to evaluate language knowledge, in which it tends to treat the norms of writing as a base of general linguistic characterization, dispensing of many uses that are often manifest in the spoken language and in well-identified contexts. With all this, we can suppose that language assessment and certification lead to perceptions of the greater simplicity and homogeneity, in part to be exercised from areas of greater symbolic power, where the hegemonies become more apparent. Social bias and prescriptivism are inherent to the design of the tests, apart from the fact that many tests are simply inefficient to measure linguistic ability. The question immediately arises: how can simplicity be compartmentalized and at the same time, coincide with the rigidity of the prescriptivism of the ideology of the standard and with the flexibility and complexity of languages as they are naturally manifested?

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Here is a key issue, although it is not the only one. In Lyle Bachman and Adrian Palmer's (1996) classic proposal, this question is related to "authenticity", which could be one of the notions that would define the utility of an exam next to practicality, reliability, validity or interaction. For Bachman and Palmer (1996: 23) authenticity could be:

The grade of correspondence of a language test with the use of the target language, understood as use outside the environment of a test or examination.

To address compliance to this requirement of “authenticity”, it must be kept in mind that the evaluation of knowledge of languages usually does not measure linguistic use as it occurs in natural specific situations, but rather, standardized uses and experimental procedures that are very distant from everyday communication. It is generally assumed that standardized tests are objective, but it is not usually appreciated that such objectivity could also include differences in the linguistic characteristics of speakers from different origins. This is especially true when it comes to evaluating the knowledge of the language by means of international and massive instruments. In this respect, it is relevant to remember that John Trim considers that international exams should be honest, reliable, valid and transparent, and that they must be “portable”, or as we could say, “recontextualizable”, due to the contemporary globalization of education and mobility (Trim 2011).

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As a consequence of this, there appears to be what we can call the *paradox of the scriptwriter*. This paradox tells us the following: an individual (I1) is able to produce a text in its specific context (C1), creating a context (X) that is supposed to be interpreted exactly as X, from a specific context (C2) by an individual (I2), which is impossible. In this way, the editor of international tests, from their own

context, frames contextualized issues in a certain way, which must be interpreted as such by an indefinite number of candidates who carry out the tests from an infinity of specific contexts, which impedes the exact interpretation of the original issues. An exam situation is a highly specialized context that is not neutral for the candidates, much less if they are from different international origins.

Another fundamental pitfall arises from culture. Linguistic and cultural differences can be the source of bias, which affects the results of exams. Bias can arrive easily if one does not work from a multicultural or global perspective (Martín Rojo *et al.* 2003). Consider the following example. It is assumed that an exam may request information from candidates that may be very obvious or that such information should be able to be provided to stranger (here, an examiner) without significant issues. Nevertheless, for some cultures or groups, this very simple task (speaking about the obvious and providing information to strangers) can result in conflict, leading to the results of the exams potentially being evaluated as inadequate or insufficient. This signifies that something as simple as cultural origin, that of the test editor, that of the examiner, and that of the candidate, can introduce bias. Another clear example is that of vocabulary, as many terms are potentially conditioned by cultural factors. The only way to alleviate this complication would be to proceed through comprehensive, systematic and realistic comparisons among the language in the context of evaluation and the language of the contexts from which the examiners come. While this is impossible owing to the infinite contexts that should be taken into

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account, the only option is to resort to simplicity and potential universality and multiculturalism of the questions and contexts presented in the exams. The inter- and multicultural perspectives, together with comparative perspectives about the language and text, not only make linguistic manifestations more inclusive, (including those of exams), but also facilitate the learning of language, as well as access to a culture. From the perspective of multilingualism, it is obvious that the acquisition of a language not only gives access to communication a given language, but also provides strategies for navigating between languages and their varieties.

Hispanic Diversity, Assessment and Certification. The SICELE System

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The creators of exams cannot settle with popular linguistics nor indiscriminately assume prototypes originated from unspecialized knowledge and beliefs. For this reason, el *Sistema de Certificación de Español como Lengua Extranjera* (SICELE) [The International System of Certification of Spanish as a Foreign Language], since its establishment, has given great importance to the conception of the Spanish language in its unity and diversity, the reason for which a linguistic framework was developed that is a unique piece among the systems of certification for foreign languages, from whatever location and any language, worldwide. There is not a certification system or association that has given so much importance to the dialectal variation in relation to the exams and

certificates and that has extensively argued its interpretation of the linguistic reality of Spanish as has been done by the SICELE. The “Linguistic Framework” from SICELE was developed by its Academic Council and approved by all members of its network. This mark is presented as a declaration of the principles and intentions in relation with the way in which the Spanish language is conceived, its global diffusion and the treatment of the linguistic varieties of Spanish in the activities of teaching and evaluation. The fundamental points are the following:

- The Spanish language is conceived as the set of all its varieties in equal conditions and without considerations of linguistic hierarchy.
- Spanish is considered to be a common heritage that favors communication, cooperation and the exchange of values.
- The communities that speak Spanish have been enriched by contributions from other linguistic and cultural communities.
- The common linguistic heritage constitutes a vehicle for the exchange and dissemination of knowledge, technology and findings among scientific and professional communities.

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The SICELE aspires to give members of other linguistic and cultural communities access to this knowledge of a linguistic heritage and cultural richness of the Spanish-speaking countries, in all of their richness. The recipients of services and products of institutional members will encounter options that respond to their communication, learning, training, recognition or certification needs. These decla-

rations are specified, within the standards provided by the system, requiring from certificates the specification of the evaluated varieties (Standard 1.1.3). It is a question of specifying the variety of language that is evaluated in relation to the explicit objectives of the exam, and how that variety is reflected in the different components of the exam: instruction prompts, questions, tasks, candidate responses, etc.

Likewise, the linguistic framework of SICELE includes two fundamental aspects to understand the conception of the Spanish language. On one hand, the instructions of exams can be presented accordingly to the accepted form in each linguistic community (Mexican, Argentine, Castilian Spanish); on the other any Spanish variety acquired by the candidates will be accepted for the assessment of oral and written production.

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Conclusions

As far as the perception of the Hispanic world is concerned, the majority of native speakers are capable of moving themselves between the categories of the superordinate and subordinate level. This signifies that, generally, a Spanish speaker is capable of appreciating the family resemblance of the main varieties of Spanish, as well as the subordinate categories that one encounters in a reduced geographic area, but does not distinguish other intermediate categories: a common Madrilenian is able to perceive that a speaker is Mexican or Argentinian and can distinguish between an Aragonese and an Extremenian, but

will have difficulty distinguishing between speakers from Cordoba and Seville, or from the Canary Islands and the Dominican Republic. If this is so, it could be affirmed that the categories of the basic level for the common Spanish speakers are those that move in small geographic demarcations and that those referring to Hispanic macro-regions or large varieties are maintained at the superordinate level.

In the case of those who speak Spanish as a Second or Foreign Language, as well as of the candidates for Spanish certificates, the majority have in mind the prototypical categories associated with countries, although there is also significant categorization of the superordinate level, of the type “Latin American” or “Hispanic American”. When prototypical categories are treated, that of Spanish from Spain emerges with intensity, linked to the ideology of the standard. For Ángel López (1998), the question would be related as well with cultural, political, and economic prestige, which leads to the existence of more and less prestigious varieties. In the case of speakers of Spanish as a second or foreign language- or those who try to approach the language- the prototypes that enjoy greater recognition are those of the Spanish from Spain and from Mexico, much more than the varieties from other territories.

For the international systems of assessment and certification, it is crucial to accept some facts and principles: the importance of linguistic variation, the acceptance and respect for linguistic varieties, the recognition of variety and

diversity as a component of identity, and the anticipation of the treatment of linguistic varieties in the assessment and certification process. The difficulty for an international system of exams, like SICELE, lies in bringing these principles into practice and with linguistic, cultural and pedagogical validity, in any corner of the planet. Nevertheless, this validity can only be achieved if they are based on the principles such as those previously mentioned, principles that have been known to escape the simplified conceptions of popular language theories, largely reflected in the analysis of our international surveys. There are two more difficulties: to alleviate the “scriptwriter’s paradox” and to make the “ideology of the standard” more flexible, so as to make international exams and their certificates somewhat up-to-the-times of globalization and multiculturalism.

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