

Indo-European Language

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Question 1: Compare and contrast the language you have chosen to study and your native language (and any other languages you have studied, if you like). Consider each languages' syntax and grammar, as well as vocabulary matters, such as cognates, derivatives or borrowed words. (minimum 300 words)

Spanish is principally derived from Latin, which was brought to the Iberian Peninsula (which includes Spain and Portugal) over 2,000 years ago (218 BCE) at the beginning of the Punic wars.¹ Latin assumed some of the vocabulary of indigenous languages, and the result of this combination is what was known as Vulgar Latin. English has also been heavily influenced by Latin, so much so that some scholars call it a Germanic language with a Romance vocabulary.

Latin was not the only language to influence Spanish. Due to the Arabic occupation of the Iberian Peninsula between 711 and 1492 C.E. Spanish was heavily influenced by the Arabic language.² English is also heavily influenced by Arabic, though most Americans are unaware of this. The words “coffee,” “algebra” and “sugar” (*café*, *álgebra* and *azúcar* in Spanish) also come from Arabic.³

Spanish is a strongly inflected language and is, primarily, a two-gender system. Spanish, while a dependent-head language (adjectives follow nouns and direct objects follow verbs) puts numerals before nouns and, in certain cases, places objects before verbs.⁴ English which is also a dependent-head language also places numerals before nouns and usually places adjectives before nouns as well.

The syntax of Spanish is generally, like English, Subject/Verb/Object, though variations are far more common in Spanish than in English (in English variations are usually only used for literary or dramatic effect).

It is also a language, like most Romance languages, that allows the deletion of pronouns when they are unnecessary; while in English, dropping pronouns is rarely done but may be seen in commands (“Get out.” instead of “You get out.”) or when the pronoun appears at or near the beginning of a sentence (“Ever been there?” instead of “[Have] you ever been there?”).

Cognates are fairly consistent in Spanish, just as they are in English. The English cognate ending *-ed* is *-ado/ada* in Spanish, thus *complicated* is a cognate for *complicado*. The English cognate ending *-ous* (as in *fabulous*) is *-oso* (*fabuloso*) in Spanish.

While there are a lot of differences between Spanish and English there are also a lot of similarities. I found that learning Spanish also improved my understanding of my own native

¹ Penny, Ralph. A History of the Spanish Language. 2nd. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 8.

² Macron, Mary. “Arab Contributions to Civilization.” American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (6, 1992): 4.

³ Champneys, Arthur Charles. History of English: A Sketch of the Origin and Development of the English Language with Examples, Down to the Present Day. New York: Macmillan and Co., 1893. 311.

⁴ Comrie, Bernard. “Linguistic Typology.” Annual Review of Anthropology 17 (1988): 149.

language and opened up a door to an amazing and rich culture that I had previously had little contact with.

Question 2: Based on what you understand about the language studied, linguistics in general, and your knowledge of the associated culture(s), briefly describe how the characteristics of the language may reflect the attributes, history or values of the associated culture(s). (minimum 300 words)

What we perceive is largely due to the distinctions we draw. Most linguists agree that “language creates categories and distinctions through which humans give meaning to the world.”⁵ Interestingly, language can not only be influenced by the distinctions we draw but the distinctions we draw can also be influenced by language.

Thus the way we choose to punctuate a concept, often through the use of specific language or terminology, can influence the patterns that we or our audience discern (our perceptions). Similarly, our perceptions can influence the language we choose to use to describe a concept. This results in a recursive feedback loop with language affecting perception and perception influencing language endlessly. The study of the way language and society influence one another is the basis for the field of sociolinguistics.

Sociolinguistics is the study of language and how is effected by all aspects of society. It studies how dialects may vary between different social variables like religion, gender, and status and how these differences are used to categorize people into different social classes. It also says a lot about the culture’s value of specific gender roles.

For example, in the Spanish language, as with many other languages, there are both masculine and feminine pronouns. There are also gendered nouns and adjectives that must agree with each other in gender. Unlike German, where terms of gender nouns can fall into three classifications (masculine, feminine and neuter), Spanish nouns are generally either feminine or masculine. However, the neuter definite article *lo* can sometimes be used to identify a thing or group of things of indefinite gender. *Esto, eso* and *aquello* are neuter pronouns but are used to refer to a concept or unknown object rather than a person or thing. Additionally, *Ello* is the neuter equivalent of *él* and *ella*. Its use these days is extremely rare, although you may find it in literature. It usually is translated as “it” or “this.”

This bias in the Spanish language toward very concrete separation of masculine and feminine roles in language is also seen in the culture. A strong bias for all things masculine, especially in referring to groups of people as male even when females are present is well established in the language and culture. In fact, if referring to a group of people where 99 were female and 1 was male, the male term would still be used.

Machismo, a well-established and accepted behavior for Latin American men, is an extreme valuation of personality traits culturally associated with the masculine and a deprecation of characteristics connected to the feminine. The term literally refers to the belief in the superiority of males over females.

Language and culture are so firmly interwoven in such a highly correlated recursive feedback loop that it is next to impossible to separate them. Language influences culture and culture influences language, ad infinitum. Other languages and cultures influence this process as

⁵ David W. Anthony. *The Horse the Wheel and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 8.

cultures interact and blend together and eventually some form of homeostasis is reached until the next major interaction comes along (often in the form of war, invasion, religious doctrine, or a combination of all three).