

Stories of Words: Spanish



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Stories of Words: Spanish, Second Edition

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Contents

Learning About Words	4
Chapter 1: Everyday Sayings	5
Chapter 2: ¡Buen Apetito!.....	8
Chapter 3: Cockroaches to Cowboys	12
Chapter 4: ¡Vámonos!.....	15
Chapter 5: It's Raining <i>Gatos & Perros!</i> ...	18
Our Changing Language.....	21
Glossary.....	22
Think About It.....	23





Learning About Words

Hola! Welcome to America, where you can see and hear the Spanish language all around you. Look at street signs or on menus. You will probably see Spanish words or names. Listen to the radio or television. It is likely you will hear Spanish being spoken.

Since Spanish-speaking people first arrived in North America in the 16th century, the Spanish language has been part of American culture. Some people are being raised in Spanish-speaking homes and communities. Other people are taking classes to learn to speak and read Spanish. As a result, Spanish has become the second most spoken language in the United States.

Every day, millions of Americans are speaking Spanish. They are introducing Spanish words to the English language. Americans are speaking English words with deep Spanish roots. Or they are mixing Spanish and English words together and making new words. Whichever the case, Spanish is everywhere in the United States.

1

Everyday Sayings

To say “hello” to a friend in English, we would say, “Hi, How’s it going?” In Spanish, you would say, “*Hola, cómo estás?*” It means, “Hi, How are you?”

Many non-Spanish speakers can identify words and phrases from Spanish cultural celebrations. For example, a *fiesta* is a “party.” At a birthday fiesta, you would wish the birthday person: “*Feliz Cumpleaños!*” *Feliz* means “happy” in Spanish and *cumpleaños* means “birthday.” If you noticed that *feliz* and *fiesta* look and sound similar, then you would be right. Both words came from the Latin word for happy.



Imagine a box in the shape of an animal. This box is hung overhead from a branch of a tree. The box is called a *piñata*. At a birthday party, children take turns to hit the piñata. Why? There are small toys and candies inside of it! In Spanish, *piñata* means “jug or pot.”

When Spanish words and phrases are translated into English, there can be mistakes. For example, if someone asks you how your visit to the principal’s office was, you could say “*no bueno*,” which translates directly into “not good” in English. But “no bueno” is not the correct way to say “not good” in Spanish. The way to get across the idea in Spanish is “*no esta bien*.”



More words and phrases that you may know:

Spanish word or phrase	English translation
<i>Buenos días</i>	Good day
<i>Buenos tardes</i>	Good afternoon
<i>Buenos noches</i>	Good evening or good night
<i>Adiós</i>	Good bye
<i>Hasta mañana</i>	See you tomorrow
<i>loco</i>	crazy
<i>pronto</i>	soon or now
<i>nada</i>	nothing
<i>no problema</i>	No problem



2

¡Buen Apetito!

Spanish-speaking people have changed the way Americans eat and talk about food. Tacos, nachos, and foods like them were based on ingredients or recipes from Central and South America. It follows that many of our words for these foods come from the same area.

Explorers from Spain were the first Europeans to settle in the Americas. They took words that originated from the native people and made them sound like Spanish words. They also based spelling of native words on Spanish writing rules.

In the 1500s, one of the foods that the Spanish explorers ate for the first time was a grain that the native people called *mahiz*. This became *maíz* in Spanish and, in English, *maize*. Maize was the main food of the native people in Central America. At the time, people in England used the term *corn* for many different grains. Because maize was a type of grain, they used the word *maize* to talk about corn.



The Spanish explorers also were introduced to new spices when they came to America. They loved a spice made from the seeds of pepper. They named the pepper “jalapeño” after Jalapa, Mexico, the place where they first ate it.

Before the Spanish explorers, jalapeño peppers were known as *chili*. The jalapeño pepper was eaten raw, cooked by itself, or in a sauce. Jalapeño peppers were also smoked so they could be eaten during long journeys or after the growing season was over. The smoked jalapeño pepper is called *chipotle*. It comes from an Aztec language and means “smoked chili.”

jalapeño
peppers



chipotle

Some of our favorite dessert flavors come from South America. Chocolate is made from the seeds of the cacao plant. The word *chocolate* was used to describe the hot drink. Today we use the word to describe anything that has cacao in it, for example chocolate cake.



Vanilla was originally used by the native people to flavor the chocolate drinks. Eventually the Spanish explorers found that it could be used in other ways like adding flavor to ice cream and baked goods. Like cacao, vanilla is made from the seeds of a plant pod. When the Spaniards tasted vanilla, they named it after a word meaning “little pod.”



Dish	What's In It	Central or South American Ingredients
burrito	Rice, refried beans, and meats or vegetables, wrapped in corn or flour tortilla	Refried beans and corn tortilla
nachos	Chips made from corn tortilla, covered in cheese. Meats and vegetables are possible toppings too.	Corn tortilla, avocado, tomato
quesadilla	Folded corn or flour tortilla with melted cheese; can have meat and vegetables	Corn tortilla, avocado
taco	Corn tortilla that has been fried into a U-shape; stuffing can be cheeses, fish, meats, beans, and vegetables	Corn tortilla, avocado, tomato
guacamole	Mashed avocados and tomatoes, peppers or spices	Avocadoes, tomatoes, peppers and spices
tamales	Dough made from corn, meat and vegetables; wrapped in corn husks	Corn husks

3

Cockroaches to Cowboys

When the Spanish explorers arrived in the Americas, they saw many animals that they had never seen before. Many of our names for these animals came from them.

The coyote is a medium-sized animal that looks like a small wolf. The word *coyote* comes from an Aztec language for the animal. In the Aztec culture, the coyote was seen as a powerful and clever animal.

The Chihuahua is the smallest breed of dog in the world. Spanish explorers first met these dogs in an area where two big rivers meet in northern Mexico. The Aztec called this place *Chihuahua*, which means “to meet at a point.”





Spaniards also named armadillos. An armadillo is about the size of medium size dog. But instead of being covered in fur, an armadillo has a shell from head to back to tail. When armadillos get frightened, some will roll up like a ball. The hard shell acts like armor. This is where the armadillo gets its name. In Spanish, *armadillo* means “little armored one.”

The mosquito and cockroach are both pests that can cause a lot of trouble for people. The word *mosquito* means “little fly” in Spanish.

The name for cockroach came from the Spanish word *cucaracha*. It is believed that an English soldier came upon the Spanish word and was not familiar with it. So he changed the word to *cockroach*, a word that was more familiar to him.

When we think of the Wild West, we often think of cowboys on horses. Spanish explorers brought horses with them from Spain. Once the horses arrived in the Americas, they spread throughout the land and were called “mustangs.” The word *mustang* came from a Spanish word that means “having no master.” Just like its name, the mustang is a wild horse of any breed that has no master.

In Spanish, the word *vaquero* means “cowboy.” Said out loud, it sounds like *vah-kay-ro*. But to someone who doesn’t speak Spanish, *vaquero* sounds like “buckaroo.” In English, a *buckaroo* is another word for cowboy.



4

¡Vámonos!

Vámonos! Let's go! You can visit every Spanish-named county, city, and town in America, but it would take a very long time. There are more than 1,000 place names of Spanish origin!

Spanish explorers settled in Florida and much of the southwest of the United States. As a result, there are many Spanish names for places. Some of the names honor a city in Spain, such as New Madrid, Missouri. Others are descriptions of a place, which is true for the states of California, Montana, Colorado and Florida.



State name	Spanish word	Meaning
California	<i>california</i>	name of an imaginary place in a popular Spanish novel
Montana	<i>montaña</i>	mountain
Colorado	<i>colorado</i>	red colored
Florida	<i>Pascua florida</i>	flowering Easter; Spanish name for Palm Sunday, the day that Spanish explorers arrived



Many landforms also have Spanish names. The Sierra Nevada is a mountain range. In Spanish, *sierra* means “the jagged edge of a saw.” *Nevada* means “snow” in Spanish. Therefore, the name *Sierra Nevada* means “snowy jagged ridges.”

Over hundred of years, wind and weather can wear down the tops of mountains. The top of the mountain becomes flat like a table. This landform is called a *mesa*. In Spanish, *mesa* means “table.”



Near the southern tip of the Rocky Mountains is one of the longest rivers in North America, flowing from Colorado to the Gulf of Mexico. It serves as a border between Texas



and Mexico. In the United States, the river is called “Rio Grande,” which means “big river” in Spanish. In Mexico, the river is called *Rio Bravo del Norte* or “brave or fierce river from the North” in English.

These Spanish words can help you work out the meaning of more places in the United States:

Spanish word	Meaning	Example
<i>verde</i>	green	Verde Valley in Arizona
<i>vista</i>	view	There is a city called Vista in California, Minnesota, Missouri, and New York.
<i>palo</i>	stick	Palo Alto in California
<i>río</i>	river	Rio Grande in Texas
<i>sierra</i>	mountain range	Sierra Nevada in California
<i>mesa</i>	table	Grande Mesa in Colorado
<i>san</i>	Saint or holy	San Francisco, San Jose, San Juan, San Luis are named after saints.
<i>chula</i>	hot	There is a city called Chula in Missouri, Virginia, and Georgia.


5

It's Raining *Gatos* (Cats) and *Perros* (Dogs)!

Before modern science, people did not know how weather formed. To try and understand the reasons behind particular kinds of storms, people told stories that explained the origins of different kinds of weather. Some of our weather words are from the myths of Spanish-speaking nations.

In an old Caribbean myth, there is a god named Juracán. The letter *j* in Juracán sounds like the letter *h* in English. When Juracán was angry, it was claimed that he punished people with fierce rainstorm. Spanish sailors exploring near the Caribbean islands took the name of the Caribbean god Juracán to describe a hurricane, the fierce rainstorms that are common in the region.





A tornado, or twister, is a weather event in which violent winds spin and twist into a tight spiral. The word *tornado* comes from the Spanish word *tronada*, which means “thunder.” So how did the word for thunder become a word that means a twister? It is believed that the word *tronada* was changed to *tornado* because in Spanish *tornar* means “to turn or to return.”

The El Niño is a weather event that happens when water near northern Peru becomes warmer than usual. As the Pacific Ocean currents bring the warm water north, it brings wet weather to North America.

In Spanish, *El Niño* means “the boy child,” and *La Niña* means “the girl child.” By itself, it’s not clear why *El Niño* and *La Niña* are words that describe weather. Only when people look at when the *El Niño* happens do the names make sense. The full term *El Niño de Navidad* means “the boy from Christmas.” *El Niño* happens around late December, when Christians celebrate Christmas.





Our Changing Language

Spanish-speaking explorers saw new things in America. They picked up words from the languages in these areas. Then they gave these words the sounds and spellings of their own language.

Over time, as more English speakers lived near Spanish speakers, the words changed again. By the time many of these words became part of English, they looked and sounded quite different from the original words.

Understanding the history of a word can give you a sense of its journey around the globe. You meet the many people who have used it and changed it. All of these moments add up to the ever-changing story of a word.

Glossary

translate to put into words of a different language

origin source, root

native the first people of a place

explorer a person who travels to a new place

Aztec a people who lived in Mexico before Spanish explorers

breed a type

myth a traditional story that explains events in nature

armor metal coverings worn by soldiers to protect the body in battle

landform a identifiable, naturally formed feature on the Earth's surface such as plains, mountains, and valleys



Think About It

- Locate three places with Spanish-sounding names on a map of the United States. Do research to learn the origin of their names.
- Describe one of the foods mentioned in this book. How is it like food that you know? How is it different?
- Work with a friend to find something you do or use in your classroom everyday. Create a new name for it, and explain why you chose that name.



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