

SPANISH PRONUNCIATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

This document teaches you all the speech-sounds of Spanish. The variety taught is Castilian Spanish. This is official language of Spain, and the variety spoken in Madrid and in the central regions of Spain.

2. INDIVIDUAL SOUNDS

2.1. Plosives

p Voiceless bilabial plosive, unaspirated.

Like English *p*, but without the following puff of breath.

'**para** for.

b Voiced bilabial plosive.

Like English *b*, but with more buzz. **ba'stante** *enough*.

t Voiceless denti-alveolar plosive, unaspirated.

Like English *t*, but with the tongue pushed against the front teeth and without the following puff of breath.

'**taɾðe** *afternoon*.

d Voiced denti-alveolar plosive.

Like English *d*, but with the tongue pushed against the front teeth and with more buzz. **an'daɾ** *walk*.

k Voiceless velar plosive, unaspirated.

Like English *k*, but without the following puff of breath.

'**kaʎe** *street*.

g Voiced velar plosive.

Like English *g*, but with more buzz. '**graθias** *thank you*.

2.2. Affricates

tʃ Voiceless post-alveolar affricate, laminal.

Like *ch* in English *church*, but using the blade of the tongue (the part behind the tip), rather than the tip as in English. '**tʃiste** *joke*.

dʒ Voiced post-alveolar affricate, laminal.

Like *j*, *dg* in English *judge*, but using the blade of the tongue (the part behind the tip), rather than the tip as in English. '**dʒo** *I*.

2.3. Nasals

m Voiced bilabial nasal.

Like English *m*. '**mas** *more*.

ɱ Voiced labio-dental nasal.

Like English *m*, but with the upper teeth pushing in front of the lower lip and biting down on it; the lips do not meet. Some English speakers use this sound when an *f* sound follows an *m*, as in the word *emphasis*. **ɱfin** *in short*.

n Voiced alveolar nasal.

Like English *n*. '**naða** *nothing*.

ɲ Voiced palatal nasal.

Like the *ny* sound in English *onion*. **ma'ɲana** *tomorrow*.

ŋ Voiced velar nasal.

Like *ng* in English *long*. **ɛŋkɔn'tɾaɾ** *meet*.

2.4. Tap and trill

ɾ Voiced alveolar tap.

Like a very old-fashioned pronunciation of English *r* in *very*, made by tapping the tongue against the ridge behind the teeth. **pa'ɾaɾ** *stop*.

r: Voiced alveolar trill, prolonged.

Like a heavily rolled *r* that continues for a long time. **θe'r:ar** *close*.

2.5. Fricatives

f Voiceless labio-dental fricative.

Like English *f*. **fa'milja** *family*.

θ Voiceless interdental fricative.

Like *th* in English *thick*. **'θerka** *nearby*.

s Voiceless alveolar fricative.

Like *ss* in English *hiss*. **sa'βer** *know*.

z Voiced alveolar fricative.

Like *z* in English *lazy*. **'mizmo** *same*.

x Voiceless velar fricative.

Like the *ch* sound in Scottish *loch*. **'xente** *people*.

2.6. Approximants

β Voiced bilabial approximant.

Halfway between English *b* and English *w*; a buzzing sound made by bringing the two lips together without touching.

a'βaxo *below*.

ð Voiced interdental approximant.

Like *th* in English *this*, but with the tongue not touching the teeth. **aju'ðar** *help*.

ɣ Voiced velar approximant.

Like *g* in English *good*, but with the tongue not touching the roof of the mouth. **lu'ɣar** *place*.

j Voiced palatal approximant.

Like *y* in English *yoyo*. **a'jer** *yesterday*.

l Voiced alveolar lateral-approximant.

Like English *l*. **'laðo** *side*.

ʎ Voiced palatal lateral-approximant.

Like the *ly* sound in English *million*. **'ʎaβe** *key*.

w Voiced labial-velar approximant.

Like English *w*. **'gwapa** *pretty*.

2.7. Vowels

i Close front unrounded vowel.

Like *ee* in English *flee*, but shorter. **ir** *go*.

ɨ Close front unrounded vowel, extra-short.

Like *ee* in English *flee*, but too short to count as a syllable. **'noβia** *girlfriend*.

e Mid front unrounded vowel.

Like *e* in English *dress*, but with the front of the tongue raised a little. **'eso** *that-thing*.

a Open central unrounded vowel.

Like *a* in English *path*, but shorter, and with the tongue further forward. **'alto** *tall*.

ɔ Mid back rounded vowel.

Like the vowel-sound in English *thought*, but with the tongue a little higher. 'ɔmbre *man*.

u Close back rounded vowel.

Like oo in English *moon*, but using an old-fashioned pronunciation with strongly rounded lips and the middle of the tongue pushed down, and shorter. 'unɔ *one*.

ɯ Close back rounded vowel, extra-short.

Like oo in English *moon*, but too short to count as a syllable. 'paɯsa *break*.

3. SOUNDS IN FLUENT SPEECH

3.1. Mouth position

All languages have a characteristic position of the mouth, a way of holding the vocal organs that colours the overall sound. For Spanish, the focus is slightly forward in the mouth, with a lot of tension in the muscles of the cheeks and lips, and fast, precise movements of the tongue. The jaw is kept forward, not retracted.

3.2. Rhythm

Spanish makes little contrast between stressed and unstressed syllables. It has a 'syllable-timed' rhythm, which means that each syllable takes about the same time to say as any other, and that syllables are uttered at a steady rate, like a little machine-gun. This rhythm is very different from, for example, that of English or Russian, where some syllables take an enormous amount of time while others are practically lost.

3.3. Stress

Getting the stress on the right syllable is important if you are to understand and be understood. In Spanish the stress often falls on the penultimate syllable of the word; but stress can also vary with different grammatical phenomena, giving rise to such triplets as **de'posito** (*a deposit (noun)*) - **depo'sito** *I deposit (verb, pres.)* - **deposi'to** *he deposited (verb, past def.)*. So you have to learn the stress with each word and with each grammatical feature. In this course, stress is shown by the ', which means that the immediately following syllable is stressed.

4. SOUND-CHANGES IN CONNECTED SPEECH ('SANDHI')

In all languages, sounds get changed when words are joined together: in English, for example, the final *t* of *west* is pronounced when the word stands alone, but not in such phrases as *West Country*. The linguistic term for such changes is 'sandhi'. Sandhi changes can make the language unintelligible if you are not prepared for them.

Such changes are a noticeable feature of Spanish. Not all speakers consistently make all the changes described below -

people make fewer changes on more formal occasions, for example. In this course, these changes are made in some examples but not in others, as seems appropriate in the immediate context. This mimics what you will hear from native speakers.

4.1. Plosives and affricates *versus* approximants

The plosives **b** and **g** are used only at the beginning of a phrase, or when preceded by **n**; in all other contexts, they change to their corresponding approximants **β** and **ɣ**:

'b̥ien well	'gɔɾða fat (f.)
mui 'β̥ien very well	la 'ɣɔɾða the fat lady
tam'b̥ien also	uŋ 'gɔɾðɔ a fat man

Similarly, the plosive **d** and the affricate **dʒ** are used only at the beginning of a phrase, or when preceded by **n** or **l** or **ʌ**; in other contexts, they change to their approximant equivalents **ð** and **j**:

'dia day	'dʒer:ɔ iron
de 'ðia by day	'esɔ 'jer:ɔ this iron
un 'dia one day	kɔŋ 'dʒer:ɔ with iron
al 'dia in the day	eʌ 'dʒer:ɔ the iron

It has to be said that the 'approximant equivalents' of these consonants vary considerably: sometimes the airstream is so nearly blocked that the sound is all but a plosive, and sometimes it is partly blocked, producing audible friction. There also seems to have been a view at one time among primary teachers that the letter **b** should be pronounced as a plosive, and the letter **v** as an approximant, a view not held by the majority of speakers. In this course, the approximant equivalents are presented as standard, frictionless approximants.

4.2. Voiceless fricatives

When the voiceless fricatives **s** and **θ** are followed by voiced consonants, they change to their voiced counterparts **z** and **ð** respectively:

bwenɔs 'ðias	changes to	bwenɔz 'ðias good morning
la 'kruθ	changes to	la 'kruð 'r:ɔxa the Red
'r:ɔxa	to	Cross

4.3. Varieties of **n** and **l**

When **n** comes before the labial consonants **p** or **b**, it changes to its labial equivalent **m**; before **f**, it changes to **ɱ**; before the palatals **tʃ**, **dʒ** and **ʌ** it changes to **ɲ**; and before the velar consonants **k**, **g** and **x** it changes to **ŋ**:

un 'mes	changes to	um 'mes one month
en fa'milja	changes to	eɱ fa'milja in the family
un 'tʃiste	changes to	uɲ 'tʃiste a joke

un ka'fe	changes to	uŋ ka'fe	<i>a coffee</i>
kɔn xa'mɔn	changes to	kɔŋ xa'mɔn	<i>with ham</i>

When *l* is followed by a palatal consonant, it changes to *ʎ*:

eɫ 'tʃiste	changes to	eʎ 'tʃiste	<i>the joke</i>
eɫ 'dʒer:ɔ	changes to	eʎ 'dʒer:ɔ	<i>the iron</i>

4.4. Use of *ɾ* and *r*:

The r-sound can be either a tap (*ɾ*) or a long trill (*r*:). In the middle of a word between vowels, the tap and the trill create different meanings - 'karo *dear*, 'kar:ɔ *cart* - so you have to learn that with the word. At the start of a word (irrespective of where it falls in the phrase), and after *n*, *l* and *s*, only the long trill is used: 'r:aðiɔ *radio*, enr:ɔ'lar *enlist*. Elsewhere either the tap or the trill may be used (this course shows only the tap in these other positions).

4.5. Use of *ʎ* and *j*

Some speakers do not always differentiate between *ʎ* and *j*, saying (for example) 'kaje *street* instead of 'kaʎe. This change is not further dealt with in this course.

4.6. Double consonants

When two identical consonants come together, one of them is removed:

em 'beð ðe	changes to	em 'be ðe	<i>instead of</i>
'dos se'manas	changes to	'do se'manas	<i>two weeks</i>

4.7. Sequences of vowels

In general, when two identical vowels come together, one is lost; and when two different vowels come together, they coalesce into one syllable:

una a'miɣa	changes to	una'miɣa
una 'ɔra	changes to	u'naɔra

If one of the vowels is unstressed *i* or *u*, however, it becomes *ɨ* or *ʉ* respectively (or *w* if it is *u* and first in the pair):

'graθi̯as	<i>thank you</i>
sei̯s	<i>six</i>
'paʉsa	<i>break</i>
asta'lwexɔ	<i>see you later</i>

But when *i* falls between two vowels, it changes to *j*:

'trenta i 'unɔ	changes to	'trenta j 'unɔ	<i>thirty-one</i>
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5. NON-CASTILIAN VARIETIES OF SPANISH

The following features may be heard in Spain outside Castile, or in South America:

- h for s: lɔh ehpa'ɲɔleh for los espa'ɲɔles *the Spaniards*
- s for θ: a'sukaɾ for a'θukaɾ *sugar*
- θ for s: θu 'kaθa for su 'kasa *his house*
- dz for λ: 'pɔdzɔ for 'pɔλɔ *chicken*
- ŋgw for nw: uŋ'gweβɔ for un'weβɔ *an egg*

6. LETTER-TO-SOUND RULES

The letter-to-sound rules of a language tell you how to translate its written form into sounds that you can pronounce. This is easier to do if you know what the possible sounds are, so this Description has dealt with that subject in depth. The translation is best thought of as a two-stage process: first noting the direct equivalent for a letter, and then applying the relevant fluent-speech changes. So, for example, **recibir** gives **reθi'βiɾ** at the first stage and **r:eθi'βiɾ** at the second stage.

6.1. Stressed syllable

In Spanish, the position of the stress in a word makes a difference to the meaning; so you need to establish which syllable is stressed. The rules are straightforward:

- if the word carries an acute accent, the stress falls on that syllable: **fábrica** 'faβrika *factory*.
- if the word carries no accent but ends in a vowel or **n** or **s**, it is stressed on the penultimate syllable: **muchachos** mu'tʃatʃɔs *boys*.
- if it carries no accent and does not end in a vowel or **n** or **s**, it is stressed on the last syllable: **buscar** bus'kaɾ *to look for*.

To implement these rules, you need to know what counts as a syllable. Normally each vowel forms the centre of a separate syllable, so **pronto** *soon* has two syllables, and **piscina** *swimming-pool* has three. Where two vowels come together, and neither of them is **i** or **u**, they form two syllables for the purpose of determining where the stress falls: **leo** 'le.ɔ *I read*, **desea** de'se.a *she wants*. (The dot marks a syllable break. Note however that the two syllables may subsequently be reduced to one in fluent speech.) If one of the two vowels is **i** or **u**, they form two syllables if the **i** or **u** carries a written accent, but one syllable if it does not:

- país **pa'is** *country* - **aí** forms two syllables.
- aire 'aḭre *air* - **ai** forms one syllable.
- continuo **konti'nu.ɔ** *I continue* - **úo** forms two syllables.
- pausa 'paḷsa *pause* - **au** forms one syllable.

6.2. Letters to sounds

a spells **a**. mañana ma'ɲana *tomorrow*.

b spells b/β. bebo 'beβo *I drink*.

- **v** spells the same pair of sounds.

c spells k or θ.

- in **ca, co, cu, c** spells k. calle 'kaʎe *street*, comer ko'mer *to eat*, Cuba 'kuβa *Cuba*, cuanto 'kwanto *as much*.

- in **ce, ci, c** spells θ. cerrar θe'r:ar *to shut*, cinco 'θiŋko *five*.

ch spells tʃ. muchacho mu'tʃatʃo *boy*.

d spells d/ð. dedo 'deðo *finger*.

e spells e. elemento ele'mento *element*.

f spells f. en fin eŋ'fin *in short*.

g spells g/ɣ or x.

- in **ga, go, gu, g** spells g/ɣ. galgo 'galɣo *greyhound*, gordo 'gɔɾðo *fat*, gustar gus'tar *to please*, agudo a'ɣuðo *sharp*.

- in **ge, gi, g** spells x. gente 'xente *people*, ginebra xi'neβra *gin*.

- the letters **gua** spell **gwa** (guarda 'gwarða *guard*), but **gue, gui** spell **ge, gi** (**u** is there to indicate that **g** represents **g**, not **x**). guerra 'ger:a *war*, guitarra gi'tar:a *guitar*.

- the sounds **gwe, gwi** are represented by **güe, güi** (the diaeresis indicates that **u** has its own value, and that **g** therefore represents **g**). antigüedad antiɣwe'ðað *antiquity*, lingüístico liŋ'gwistiko *linguistic*.

h is normally silent, and has no effect on the pronunciation.

- in word-initial **hie**, however, it spells dʒ/j. hiela 'dzela *it freezes*.

i spells i/ï. familia fa'milja *family*.

j spells x. ajo 'axo *garlic*

k spells k. kilo 'kilo *kilo*.

l spells l. hola! 'ola *hello!*

ll spells ʎ. pollo 'poʎo *chicken*.

m spells m. como 'komo *how*.

n spells n/m/ŋ/p/ɲ.

- banana ba'nana *banana*.

- invitar imbi'tar *to invite*.

- con furia koŋ 'furja *furiously*.

- un chico uŋ 'tʃiko *a boy*.

- un coche uŋ 'kɔtʃe *a motor-car*.

ñ spells ɲ. niño 'niɲo *child*.

o spells o. oro 'oro *gold*.

p spells p. papel pa'pel *paper*.

q spells k.

- it is found only in the combinations **que, qui**, which spell **ke, ki** respectively. queso 'keso *cheese*, quince 'kinθe *fifteen*.

r spells r or r:.

- when doubled, it spells *r*:. arroz a'r:ɔθ *rice*.
- when single, it spells *r* (which may become *r*: in some positions). retardar r:etar'ðar *to delay*.
- s** spells *s/z*. los mismos lɔz 'mizmos *the same ones*.
- t** spells *t*. tutear tu'tear *to address as "tu"*.
- u** spells *u/w*. luna 'luna *moon*, puente 'pwente *bridge*.
- v** spells *b/β*. vivo 'biβɔ *I live*.
 - **b** spells the same pair of sounds.
- w** spells *w*. whisky 'wiski *whisky*.
- x** spells *ks* or *s*. examen ek'samen *examination*, taxi 'taksi *taxi*.
 - pronunciations with *s* (e'samen, 'tasi) are considered unprestigious.
 - México *Mexico*, exceptionally, is pronounced 'mexiko.
- y** spells *dʒ/j*. yerno 'dʒerno, mi 'jerno (*my*) *son-in-law*.
 - when standing alone, however, it spells *i*. y tu! i 'tu *you too!*.
- z** spells *θ*. azul a'θul *blue*.

Until 1994 the Spanish alphabet consisted of the 29 letters shown above: **ch**, **ll** and **ñ** had separate slots in alphabetic lists, after **c**, **l** and **n**, and **ch** and **ll** occupied only one space in crosswords. In 1994 the Academy removed the special status of **ch** and **ll**, leaving 27 letters, but the traditional system may still be met with.

7. GLOSSARY

- Affricate:** a plosive followed immediately by a fricative at the same point of articulation, the two sounds coming so close together that they sound like one sound.
- Alveolar:** the tip of the tongue articulates with the alveolum. See 'Alveolum'.
- Alveolum:** the bony ridge behind the upper front teeth.
- Approximant:** the articulators, by shaping the air-stream through the mouth, create a resonance, but not a hiss.
- Aspirated:** followed by a strong puff of breath, as though blowing out a candle. See 'Unaspirated'.
- Back:** a vowel where the back part of the tongue is tense.
- Bilabial:** the upper and lower lips articulate together.
- Central:** a vowel where the centre of the tongue is tense.
- Close:** a vowel where the tense part of the tongue is near to the roof of the mouth.
- Denti-alveolar:** a sound in which the tongue articulates simultaneously with the back of the upper front teeth and the alveolum. See 'Alveolum'.
- Extra-short:** an extra-short vowel is one where the sound is heard for a very short period of time - perhaps one-tenth of a second.
- Fricative:** the air-stream through the mouth is made sufficiently narrow to cause hiss, but not completely blocked.
- Front:** a vowel where the front part of the tongue is tense.
- Interdental:** the tongue is thrust forward between the front teeth.
- Labial-velar:** the sound is made with the two lips, but the back

of the tongue is also raised.

Labio-dental: the upper front teeth articulate with the lower lip.

Laminal: using the blade of tongue (the part immediately behind the tip).

Lateral-approximant: the centre of the tongue touches the roof of the mouth at the specified point; the sides of the tongue are retracted.

Mid: a vowel where the tense part of the tongue is halfway between the floor and the roof of the mouth.

Nasal: of a consonant, one in which the breath passes through the nose (the articulators block the passage through the mouth). Of a vowel, one in which the breath passes partly through the nose and partly through the mouth. See 'Oral'.

Open: a vowel where the tense part of the tongue is near the floor of the mouth.

Oral: a vowel that is pronounced wholly through the mouth (i.e. no breath passes through the nose). See 'Nasal'.

Palatal: the tongue articulates with the palate, the hard middle part of the roof of the mouth.

Plosive: the air-stream through the mouth is blocked: pressure is built up and released suddenly.

Post-alveolar: the tongue articulates with the area behind the alveolum, where it joins the palate. See 'Alveolum'.

Rounded: a vowel where the lips are rounded (by pulling in the corners of the mouth).

Short: a short vowel is one where the sound continues for only a brief period - say about one-fifth of a second.

Tap: a consonant where one articulator touches the other briefly while in movement.

Trill: a consonant where one articulator vibrates against the other.

Unaspirated: an unaspirated plosive does not have the puff of breath that accompanies most plosives in English. See 'Aspirated'.

Unrounded: a vowel where the lips are spread, not rounded.

Velar: the tongue articulates with the velum. See 'Velum'.

Velum: the soft back part of the roof of the mouth.

Voiced: with a voiced sound, the vocal chords vibrate: the sound can be sung; if you put your hands over your ears, you can hear a buzz; if you touch your larynx lightly, you can feel vibrations. See 'Voiceless'.

Voiceless: with a voiceless sound, the vocal chords do not vibrate: the sound cannot be sung; if you put your hands over your ears, you do not hear a buzz; and if you touch your larynx lightly, you feel no vibrations. See 'Voiced'.