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Learning Spanish

Very soon after we were arrived in Los Alamos, I received a note from the group secretary saying to call a Mrs. Jaramillo at such-and-such a phone number. It obviously had to do with getting a phone from Southwest Bell installed in the house we were about to move into. So I called and asked for her by name. Unfortunately I pronounced the name as I read it, i.e., as “Mrs. Dzarr-ah-mil-loh.” She gently corrected me and said it was really “Har-rah-mee-yo.” It was about this time that I realized that, if I was going to continue living in New Mexico, I ought to learn how to pronounce Spanish names. At least.

Nuevo México has, besides English, Spanish as one of the official languages. (There are several others used by the various Indian cultures, but they aren't official.) In addition to the many signs, legal documents, including election ballots, are in both languages. About 48% of the state's population is Hispanic, with the rest of us classified as Indian or Anglo. (The group called Anglo includes also black and Asian folks, as a matter of simplicity.) Spanish came North from Mexico with the Conquistadores in the 16th century. It evolved (or didn't evolve) into a Spanish somewhat different from that spoken in Mexico today. Along the way it picked a lot of Englishisms, and some people here are proud Spanglish speakers. This version of the language is difficult to understand by those people who have recently arrived here from Mexico.

Back in 1969, after several vacations in Latin American countries when Maggie and I didn't speak any Spanish, we somehow discovered the Instituto Mexicano Norteamericano de Relaciones Culturales in the Zona Rosa in Mexico City. This Institute offered, at that time, four-week intensive language courses in both English and Spanish. Since, also at that time, the Laboratory offered four weeks of vacation, we decided to try it. The tuition was pretty modest and, who knows?, maybe we'd like it and learn something! We arrived in the Distrito Federal in November of that year.

We did like it. There were actually a set of five four-week courses, each of which came with its own specialized textbook. So, we returned in April of 1971 to take Course Three, having in the previous year worked through Course Two by ourselves, working through its textbook at the dinner table night after night after supper. Another good intensive month. And we came back for Course Four in May of 1972. By that time we had become fluent enough to get along fairly well by ourselves. We decided it wasn't necessary for us to do Course Five, which was heavy on the familiar plural tense (*vosotros*), which wasn't much used in Latin America.

In addition to the classes at the Instituto, which took up four hours of the morning, we started going to the movies each afternoon for more immersion in spoken Spanish. These were mostly ridiculous movies, being made in Churrobusco, a suburb of Mexico City. People called them Churros, because it was common to pick up some churros to eat while watching the film. Churros are fried bread dough, similar to New Orleans Beignets, but longish instead of squat.

To illustrate their ridiculousness, in one of the Westerns, the good guys rode their horses into a saloon full of bad guys. A big shootout. Somehow the good guys won, and somehow not a single horse in that saloon suffered a bullet wound. It isn't fair to say they were *all* ridiculous. A poignant drama entitled “Siempre Hay Una Primera Vez” was good, depicting the deflowering of a young maid by the

arrogant son in the family she worked for. However, my favorite Mexican movie is “Como Agua para Chocolate” (“Like water for Chocolate”) by Alfonso Arau.

On returning to Los Alamos, having been hooked on bad Churros, we discovered that the Espanola Drive-In would show imported Churros every Tuesday during the summer. We frequently attended. Again, largely ridiculous. In one, in the Garden of Eden, Adam repeatedly says, in broken Spanish, “Yo Adan – Tu Eva.” He kept stumbling on and cursing at a particular tree root, while running around (discretely) naked. Eva was a good-looking blonde, also discreetly naked. We didn’t get much Spanish practice until the Serpent started to speak. Very clearly, and with the correct use of the subjunctive tenses.

That first year at the Instituto we met Roberto Zendejas, who was there learning English. It was initially just so he had someone with whom he could practice his English, but it rapidly turned around so that we also could practice our incipient Spanish. He was about ten years younger than us and was employed as an accountant for some firm in the D.F., I don’t remember any details of that. Anyway, on our second or third meeting, he invited us to his home, i.e., his parents house, for lunch. This was in Nueva Atzacualco, in the northern part of that very large city near the Basilica de Guadalupe. This was a large family home built by his father, who had emigrated with his wife to the D.F. from Michoacan some decades earlier. Roberto had eight siblings, of whom only the two youngest daughters still lived in the family home. Of course, no one there spoke any English, other than Roberto, so that was also a big help in our learning Spanish.

Over many years we became quite close to that family, eventually meeting all of his brothers and many of the older sisters. One of them was a nun somewhere in the east. All of the off-spring of the once-peasant parents had good schooling and were more or less professionals in their work. As for Roberto, he decided that becoming a priest was more to his calling than accounting. At one point he was posted to Chicago (the English helped) and he was able to visit us in Los Alamos on his way back to Mexico City. He was still giving five or six masses a week (at *his* advanced age!) when I heard from him around Christmas last year.

On many of our visits to Mexico, for courses at the Instituto and afterwards, I often arranged with one or another of their universities to give a physics seminar. I usually spoke in English, but at some point I thought my Spanish was good enough to give them in Spanish. For such a seminar it was possible to prepare the overhead transparencies in Spanish instead of the usual English. That way, if I got stuck thinking about what to say, I could refresh my words from the projection on the screen. But that didn’t always help, particularly when I had to respond to a question from the audience. I had forgotten this, but my friend Mort Sternheim reminded me of one time when I didn’t know an appropriate answer. (This *does* happen, believe me.) So I responded, “Lo siento, pero no se. Estoy muy embarazado.” And the audience burst into laughter. I had stumbled on a False Friend, as what I had said was, “Sorry, I don’t know. I am very pregnant.”).

Back home in Los Alamos, Maggie fell into the habit of, when shopping at the Safeway, of speaking to the Hispanic check-out clerks in Spanish. She was amused to discover that when it came time to do some arithmetic for the charges, they did their reckoning in English. Probably because they learned their arithmetic in English at school. She teased them about that: “Yo puedo contar en Español, porque no Tu!” After a month or so of putting up with her teasing, some of them actually bothered to learn to “contar en Español.”

And that reminds me of my favorite bi-lingual knock-knock joke:

“Toque, toque.” to which one replies

“¿Quien es?”

“Juan.”

“¿Juan, quien?”

“¡Juan y Juan son dos!”

Five years after the four Instituto courses we decided, in 1977, that we needed to freshen-up our Spanish. We found out about a three-week intensive refresher course in Cuernavaca. This was a bit more pricey than those at the Instituto, which I suspect had already bit the dust back in the Zona Rosa. It was also quite good, and one of the advantages of their course was that the students were put up separately as lodgers in local families that didn't speak or understand English. Double immersion, so to speak. It worked well.

It wasn't until 1988 that we finally ended up in Spain, having been invited there on a mixed vacation by Juan Perez Mercader, a frequent visitor to my group at LANL. We had him as a frequent dinner guest and he helped in the translation of Maggie's Coyote Stories in Spanish. Here too, at his institute in Madrid, I gave a seminar. But having learned my lesson and not having spoken much Spanish in recent years, I gave it in English with Spanish sub-titles on the transparencies. As I hinted at above, the language in Spain is a bit different in pronunciation and vocabulary from that in Mexico (and Guatemala and Chile), but we somehow got by, not having any occasion to use the familiar second-person plural.