

Journey With Language – Variations in Spanish (7) Central America

●Destination --Central America

It has been about 30 years since I first visited Central America. I was a university student at that time, and did not speak Spanish very well. My friends and I traveled for about a month, from Mexico all the way to Panama, and back to Mexico by a different route without taking the Pan-American Highway (*Carretera Panamericana*). We visited Mexico (*México*), Guatemala, San Salvador in El Salvador, Tegucigalpa in Honduras, Managua in Nicaragua, San Jose (*San José*) in Costa Rica, and Panama (*Panamá*). Enjoying each place we visit, we would try to find a place to stay in the evening, or else camp out when we could not find one. Even now when I see those city names on a map, they remind me of the view, the climate, and all the good memories.



【Picture 1: Tegucigalpa, the Capital of Honduras】

When I visited Mexico for an academic meeting three years ago, I flew to Honduras and El Salvador, places I had not yet researched for the study of language variations. Unlike the very quiet remote town I remembered from 30 years ago, Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, was loud and lively with lots of construction in downtown. San Salvador in El Salvador had also changed drastically and people now seem to be enjoying their lives after recovering from the civil war.



【Picture 2: Pulpería, a Kiosk in Tegucigalpa】

Central America is sometimes referred to as a “transitional area” (*área de transición*) in Spanish dialectology. Here is an explanation by Vladimir Honsa of the University of Nevada.¹

Después del descubrimiento de América Central por Colón en 1502 y la toma

¹ "Coincidencia de tipos dialectales en América Central", *Actas del VI Congreso Internacional de la Asociación de Lingüística y Filología de la América Latina*, México, UNAM, 1988.

de posesión en 1513 del Océano Pacífico por Balboa, la llegada de la lengua española progresó con rapidez. Centroamérica constituía el cruce de caminos de la conquista y así, la tierra de encuentro de varias formas lingüísticas del español originadas en la época colonial en España o en América.

After Columbus reached Central America in 1502, and Balboa saw the Pacific Ocean in 1513, the arrival of the Spanish language progressed with speed. Central America became the crossroads of the conquest, and the land for the encounter of various Spanish linguistic forms originated in Spain and America during the colonial period.

Central America is a complicated transition area of Highland Spanish from Mexico in the north with strong consonants and weak vowels and Caribbean Spanish from Panama in the south with strong vowels and weak consonants. Language change (*vos* > *tú*) that was seen in Spain in the 17th century did not reach Central America due to the distance, and “*vos*” is still being used. It is also true in Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay for the same reason.



【Picture 3: Airport in El Salvador (San Salvador)】



【Picture 4: City of San Salvador】

●Pursuit of Language - Country and City Names

Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, is a word from the native language meaning “silver mountain”. San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador on the other hand, is a Spanish word meaning “Christ, the Savior” in relation to the day the construction of the capital began. Most country names and city names in Latin America have their origins either in the indigenous language or Spanish. We will look at the country names first.

Indigenous Language	Spanish
<i>Cuba</i> : “center”	<i>República Dominicana</i> : “Sabbath”
<i>México</i> : “name of the God in Aztec”	<i>Puerto Rico</i> : “rich port”
<i>Guatemala</i> : “eagle”	<i>Honduras</i> : “depth”
<i>Nicaragua</i> : “Nicarao chief”	<i>El Salvador</i> : “Savior”
<i>Panamá</i> : “the place of abundant fish”	<i>Costa Rica</i> : “rich coast”
<i>Perú</i> : “river”	<i>Colombia</i> : “the land of Columbus”
<i>Chile</i> : “land’s end”	<i>Venezuela</i> : “little Venice”
<i>Paraguay</i> : “big river”	<i>Ecuador</i> : “equator”
	<i>Bolivia</i> : “the land of (Simon) Bolivar”

<i>Uruguay</i> : “winding river”	<i>Argentina</i> : “silver country”
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Then the capitals.

Indigenous Language	Spanish
<i>Habana</i> : “Havana”	<i>Santo Domingo</i> : “Sabbath”
<i>Tegucigalpa</i> : “silver mountain”	<i>San Juan</i> : “St. John”
<i>Managua</i> : “big water vessel”	<i>Ciudad de México</i> : “City of Mexico”
<i>Bogotá</i> : “chief Bogota”	<i>San Salvador</i> : “Savior”
<i>Caracas</i> : “Caracas (tribe)”	<i>San José</i> : “St. Joseph”
<i>Quito</i> : “Quito (tribe)”	<i>La Paz</i> : “the Peace”
<i>Lima</i> : “the place for prophecy”	<i>Asunción</i> : “Ascension (of Mary)”
	<i>Montevideo</i> : “I see a mountain (Latin)”
	<i>Santiago</i> : “St. Jacob”
	<i>Buenos Aires</i> : “good winds”

Spain (*España*) is Phoenician meaning “the land of rabbits”, and Madrid (Madrid) is Arabic meaning “spring water”. The origins of country and city names show interesting truth of the places at the time².

●Language Variations --“Car”

While “airplane”, “train” and “boat” are “avión”, “tren” and “barco” respectively in any Spanish-speaking world, there are variations in different countries for the words “car” and “bus” (discussed in June). A “car” is *coche* (**Co** in map) in Spain, but *auto* (**A**) and *carro* (**Ca**) are common in Latin America. Some of the unique examples are: *máquina* (**M**) in Cuba and *concho* (**Cn**) in the Dominican Republic. *Automóvil* is used almost everywhere as a rather formal expression similar to “automobile” in English.

² The ones with origins in indigenous language are not as easy to determine their meanings as those with Spanish origins. I have referred to the etymological dictionaries of land names for the above chart. (Maki, Hideo. (Transl: *World Geographic Nomenclature Dictionary*.) Tokyo: Soutakusha, 1989. Arikawa, Akio. (Transl: *World Geographic Etymological Dictionary –New Edition*.) Tokyo: Kokonshoin, 1993.)



【Map: “Car”】

***Assignment -7a**

Read Lipski (1996) about the Spanish language of following six countries in Central America, and describe the similarities and differences of their characteristics.

- Guatemala: pp. 280-285.
- Honduras: pp. 286-293.
- El Salvador: pp. 272-279.
- Nicaragua: pp. 308-314.
- Costa Rica: pp. 242-250.
- Panama: pp. 315-323.

***Assignment -7b**

Lipski (1996: 278) describes the structure of “indefinite article + possessive adjective + noun” (see below) as a morphological characteristic of Spanish in El Salvador. Use

various references to study the historical/geographical distribution.

- *una mi amiga.*
- *Tenía unos sus dos años.*

*Reference: Corpus del Español: <http://www.corpusdelespanol.org/>,
Google etc.

***Assignment -7c**

Describe regional variations of the word “car” in Spanish.

*Reference: Varilex: <http://gamp.c.u-tokyo.ac.jp/~ueda/varilex/>