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## THE BUSINESS LETTER IN SPANISH: A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

With the advent of the internet and its offspring, the electronic letter, known affectionately as “e-mail,” we are seeing the passing of yet another facet of formality in the traditional writing styles in business communications, particularly the business letter. However, since not all the world is totally committed, or yet connected, to the Internet or e-mail, there is still a long way to go before the formality and elegant style of letter writing among Latin-Americans and Latin-Europeans succumbs to the technological maelstrom which is engulfing our world.

Of course this elegance is not confined to the Latinos. The English have long had a love affair with formality and propriety in business dealings. An anecdote about the crusty Duke of Wellington appeared several years ago. The Duke had the occasion to chastise one of his subordinates with a scathing letter, only to sign it with this flourish, “I have the honor to be your humble and obedient servant.” Then he added, in parenthesis, “(which you know damn well I’m not).” Likewise, the Latino writer, and recipient, cannot abandon good manners for something as trivial as business.

Doing business in Latin America demands not only an understanding of the Spanish, Portuguese, or French languages, but of the culture of the people one is dealing with. Not only is speaking correctly a necessity, but writing is also important. We will examine some very “Latin” characteristics of language usage, as reflected in business correspondence. These are intended to help those people doing business in Latin America and the Iberian Peninsula to understand and avoid some of the potential problems caused by ignorance of, or insensitivity to, cultural factors that influence the business deal.

Samovar and Porter, in their excellent work *Communication Between Cultures*, tell us that:

The translation of one language into another is far more complex than most people realize. Most people assume that text in one language can be accurately translated into another language, so long as the translator uses a good bilingual dictionary. Unfortunately, languages are not this simple, and direct translations in many cases are difficult if not impossible because (1) words have more than one meaning, (2) many words are culture-bound and have no direct translations, (3) cultural orientations can render a direct translation into nonsense and (4) a culture may not have the experiential background to permit translation of experiences from another culture. For instance, how does one translate Atlantic Ocean into the Hopi language?

A major problem in translation is that although messages may provide adequate interpretations of original text, there usually is no full equivalence through translation. (165)

All these factors come into play when doing business of any type with Latinos. The cultural factors simply cannot be ignored. In the past, direct translations of cultural factors have created havoc, particularly in advertising, as the well known, and oft-quoted, anecdote about the Chevrolet Nova shows. Latin Americans were supposed to be stimulated to buy, a car that was a new star, a “nova.” Unfortunately the name became corrupted by these same Latinos who just love a “word game” and who turned it into a “no va,” a car that doesn’t go. The car finally had its name changed to “Caribe” or Caribbean, that made it more palatable to potential buyers (Doyle, Fryer, and Cere 7).

A personal experience also illustrates that when these factors are not considered unintended consequences can become embarrassing. On a trip to Latin America aboard Continental Airlines, dinner was served. Imagine my surprise when I opened my metal silverware to see engraved on the handles the initials “CA CA.” Obviously, the designer intended to emphasize the initials for Continental. However, “caca” is the common term for feces in Spanish. I wrote Continental to apprise them of the *faux pas* and received a gracious reply that they would take the matter to their publicity department, but I heard no more about it.

In the more formal setting of written correspondence, perhaps the main characteristic of writing letters in Spanish is *extreme politeness* of the language. The politeness borders on the baroque and charmingly elegant style of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century French Literary movement known as “*préciosité*” and the “modernismo” movement in Spain and Latin America, founded by Rubén Darío, the great Nicaraguan poet. The main characteristic of both of these movements was to elevate language to a very high level of sophistication and elegance, where the form often overshadowed the message.

Even today, elegant language sets the writer off as an educated person and reflects the writer’s good manners, social grace and social class. Just as all Americans seem to want to belong to the *middle class*, most educated Latinos want to present themselves as belonging to the upper, or nearly upper, class. This upper, or educated, class is not defined strictly by money (although money and class seem to go hand-in-hand), but by conduct and *family ties*. Of course, this is reflected in great part by speech, both oral and written.

Given this very brief background, we will examine this phenomenon in practice. When writing a business letter the obvious starting point is the complete address. The English “Mr. John Jones or Dr. Bill Smith” followed by the street address is not a good start, given the importance attributed in being positively identified and with one’s education acknowledged, e.g. Sr. *Licenciado* D. (For Don= Sir) José García Jiménez or Srta. *Doctora* D<sup>a</sup> (Doña=Lady) Josefina Lozano Reyes or Sra. *Arquitecto* (Architect) D<sup>a</sup> María de los Angeles Hernández de Palacios indicating she is a lady architect married to Mr. Palacios. The use of the complete name and title makes for a smooth transition. How does one arrive at what to place on the address? There are a couple of ways: 1) copy what appears on the individual’s business card if available, or 2) call their office and ask for the information. Latin Americans like their official titles also as part of the form of address, both orally and in writing. One would address Mrs. Hernández as Arquitecto Hernández, Ms. Lozano as Doctora Lozano and Mr. García as Licenciado García.

One other potential trouble spot is the use of both the paternal and maternal last names by the vast majority of people in the Hispanic world. Although both names are used, the paternal name is in the middle. For example, Mr. Roberto Rivera Pérez would be addressed as Mr. Rivera, not Mr. Pérez. A very easy mistake is to understand the names on a

Hispanic business card according to the pattern used, and to assume the last name on the Hispanic card is the paternal one. Some people with very common last names use their maternal names to set themselves apart, and they insist on both their last names being used. The writers Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa are well known examples of this.

One of the most glaring differences between English and Spanish forms of address is the importance of the professional title. In English only Doctor and Professor are generally used, with more elevated recognition, such as “The Honorable,” reserved for judges and political dignitaries. In Spanish, Licenciado is used for university graduates, especially Licenciado en Derecho (Lawyer). Other professional titles not recognized in English are Ingeniero (Engineer), Arquitecto (architect), Maestro (Distinguished Teacher, but not a professor or doctor) and Contador Público (CPA).

The greeting that opens the letter is very important. The most common greetings are “estimado” (esteemed), “distinguido” (distinguished), and “apreciable” (esteemed) followed by the name. Another very elegant style used when writers do not know the recipient personally, but know the individual is a highly respected individual, or when they want to invite the recipient into a relationship through flattery, is to start with “muy señor mío,” literally meaning “my lord.” Other examples follow, in the format that includes the title, e.g. *Estimada Licenciada Gutiérrez; Distinguido Ingeniero Rodríguez; Apreciable Doctora Echeverría*. It is at this point that the flowery greeting begins to show good form and style. It can be enhanced with the adverb “muy” (very) e.g. *Muy distinguido Maestro Gómez, or Mi muy distinguido (My very distinguished teacher)*.

The body of the letter may contain a very sincere greeting, especially when one has been dealing with the firm for a long period of time and it usually includes a wish for good health and fortune on the part of the recipient, a short statement about events occurring for the writer and then a statement about the purpose of the letter. A short example follows:

Por la siguiente le envío un caluroso saludo deseando que al recibirla se encuentre bien y en cabal salud. Aquí en San Francisco, todo bien a Dios gracias.

(With this letter I send you warm greetings hoping that it finds you well and in good health. Things are well here in San Francisco, thanks be to God).

The greeting follows the custom that business is secondary to good manners and to the concept that good business will follow if there is a “personal” relationship between business partners. The body of the letter always follows the formal “Ud” form of address, which further accentuates the polite tone of the transaction. It is also usually employed with a very liberal use of the conditional (also known as the potential) mood. The conditional (“would you be so kind?” “could you?” “would you?”) is used to soften the request and to not appear “pushy.” This mood allows the recipients to feel they are in control of the situation and can even be magnanimous in “granting” this special plea being made by a writer.

Even when one is demanding an overdue payment for goods or services rendered, there is room for good manners to prevail. An example, taken from *Español Comercial*, follows:

A firm trying to collect a past debt, expresses a “lament that its previous five letters have not merited a response nor payment,” then moves on to a second paragraph threatening “action prejudicial to your firm,” but then closes with a plea, almost begging, “We beg you to do everything in your power to settle the debt.” The closing is also strange, given the tenor of the letter, i.e. “Your affectionate and loyal servant!” (276)

The closing of the letter is also an expression of good taste, which leaves the impression that the recipient is the one in charge, while the writer is merely a willing servant carrying out a duty. Expressions such as “Me despido con un caluroso abrazo (I leave you with a warm embrace),” or the use of the passive, “Se despide de Ud. Con un fraternal abrazo (Leave is taken with a fraternal embrace),” are used. Of course, there are countless forms for concluding. To finish the letter, one utilizes the initials S.S.S. (Su Seguro Servidor or Your Loyal Servant) or a variant of S. y Atto. S. (Su Atento y Seguro or Your Attentive and Loyal Servant). Other variations involve the level of acquaintance between the writer and the recipient. For example, a well-known acquaintance would receive “Mis más calurosos abrazos (my warmest embraces)” and may

even have these extended to the recipient's family by adding "a Ud. y su apreciable familia (to you and your esteemed family)."

In summary, the art of writing business letters in Spanish leads to good business etiquette and to personalization of the business deal. It flatters, empowers and invites (even entices) the recipient into a personal and professional relationship that will see the partnership through good and bad times.

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