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Linguistic diversity preserved as Spanish increases influence

Spain's different Autonomous Regions have strong cultural identities, which include their own linguistic traditions.

In Catalonia, the Basque Country, Galicia, and Valencia, the local government statutes recognize Catalan, Basque, Galician, and Valencian respectively as official languages; in some parts of Navarra Basque is deemed the lingua franca, and people in the Balearic Islands speak their own variety of Catalan.

These languages take their place alongside the official national tongue - Castilian.

Castilian originated in the central region of Castille, which united with Aragon in the 15th century and began to rule over a large portion of the country. Due to the area's dominance, legal documents were drawn up in Castilian and foreign relations conducted in it.

As the Spanish empire grew, Castilian became the shared language of diplomats - remaining so until the 18th century - and grammar books and dictionaries were published in France, Italy, and England.

This period was also the Golden Age of Spanish literature, when classic authors such as Cervantes and Lope de Vega made their mark, thus further promoting Spain's language and culture.

With the arrival of Columbus in America in 1492 and the ensuing migration of settlers from Spain, the language spread across the Atlantic; that year Elio Antonio de Nebrija published the first book of Castilian grammar.

However, the Spanish colonists came from a variety of regions, and a large number were from Andalusia; the accent of settlers from this area heavily influenced the development of American Spanish, which still bears Andalusian hallmarks.

Today, many people refer to Castilian as "Spanish" as it is Spain's most widely-spoken language, while the different dialects spoken in the Americas are also often dubbed "Spanish", although they differ from Castilian and from each other. Thus, the term Spanish has become an umbrella for all these different variations.

It is now the second most spoken language in the world, with 28 million native Spanish speakers in the U.S. As it is so widely used, Spanish is now viewed as a practical and useful language to learn, and courses are becoming increasingly popular across the globe.

Abel Murcia Soriano, former director of the Cervantes Institute - a Madrid-based organization promoting the teaching of Spanish and the diffusion of Spanish and Latin American culture - says, "Spanish is the language with the greatest influence and the most dynamic growth in central and eastern Europe, where the interest in learning other languages has stagnated."



His Royal Highness the Prince of Asturias opened the new headquarters of the "Instituto Cervantes" in New York last October.
(Photo: Spanish Royal Household)



Miguel de Cervantes: poet, playwright and author of Don Quixote.

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