

# Reaching across the cultural border

Katherine Dotterer

AgvoKate, Gettysburg, PA 17325

## Abstract

This paper examines cross-cultural communication in the United States, focusing on the growing Hispanic population's impact, particularly in agriculture. Through personal anecdotes and cultural analysis, it explores the complexities of navigating linguistic and cultural differences. Key topics include the prevalence of Spanish speakers, cultural awareness, and the distinction between ignorance and arrogance in cross-cultural contexts. The study addresses terminology debates (Hispanic/Latino/Latinx) and the significance of cultural holidays. Central to the discussion is the concept of "meeting in the middle" - encouraging mutual effort in language learning and cultural appreciation. This approach is proposed as a means to foster respect and build stronger communities. The paper aims to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities presented by cultural diversity, offering practical suggestions for bridging cultural divides in increasingly multicultural environments.

**Key words:** culture, arrogance, ignorance, Spanish, Hispanic

## Prevalence of Spanish speakers in the United States

The demographic landscape of the United States is undergoing significant changes, with the Hispanic community playing a major role in population growth. From 2010 to 2022, Hispanics contributed to over half of the nation's population increase. This shift is particularly noticeable in the agricultural sector, where nearly four out of five workers are Spanish speakers. These demographic trends highlight an increasing need for effective cross-cultural communication in American agriculture, including the field of veterinary medicine.

Katherine Dotterer brings a unique set of qualifications to address this need for cross-cultural communication training. Her background combines hands-on agricultural experience as a former dairy farmer with academic qualifications in Business Management and Secondary Education, specializing in Spanish. She also holds certification in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL).

Dotterer's expertise in cross-cultural communication within agricultural contexts has been honed through over 15 years of engagement with Spanish-speaking individuals in the industry. Her understanding is further enriched by study abroad experiences in Panama, Mexico and Cuba. Additionally, she has demonstrated her proficiency by developing and teaching online Spanish courses specifically designed for professionals in agriculture, showcasing her ability to bridge language gaps in specialized work environments.

## Cultural awareness

Cultural awareness is the understanding of differences in attitudes and values between oneself and people from diverse backgrounds. It encompasses language, behavior, food, art, music and religion, among other aspects. While often associated with foreign countries, cultural diversity exists within

national borders as well. During the presentation, I will demonstrate this through an informal polling exercise. I will ask the audience "what do you call a carbonated beverage", expecting a subset of the audience responding with "pop" and a subset responding with "soda". Similarly, I will ask the audience "what do you call the apparatus that runs over carpets to pick up dirt?", expecting a subset of the audience responding with "vacuum" and a subset responding with "sweeper". This diversity manifests in regional linguistic variations, as exemplified by differing terms for carbonated beverages ("soda" vs. "pop") or cleaning devices ("vacuum" vs. "sweeper") across the United States. These variations highlight the existence of subcultures shaped by geographical, familial and environmental factors, even within a seemingly homogeneous national culture. Recognizing these nuances is crucial for effective cross-cultural communication, particularly in professional settings where diverse populations intersect.

## Ignorance vs. arrogance

While often conflated, ignorance and arrogance are distinct concepts with different implications for cultural understanding. Ignorance is defined as a lack of knowledge or awareness, often unintentional and rectifiable through education and exposure to new information,<sup>1</sup> while arrogance is defined as an attitude of superiority or self-importance, resistant to new ideas or perspectives.<sup>2</sup> Einstein's assertion that "the only thing more dangerous than ignorance is arrogance" underscores the peril of closed-mindedness in intercultural contexts.<sup>3</sup> Arrogance can perpetuate misunderstandings and hinder effective communication, even in the face of new information. Ignorance can be rectified more simply and generally requires a willingness to learn and an open mindset. Overcoming arrogance, however, necessitates a more fundamental shift in attitude, involving self-reflection and humility.

Ignorance is common in most people, and I experienced it myself as I immersed myself in learning about the swine and poultry industries in the U.S. to build Spanish curriculum for non-native English speakers in these industries. Aware of my inexperience with these industries, I openly shared my lack of knowledge when reaching out to people in these industries to learn more about the inter-workings of the industries but also about the Spanish communication that is used daily within the industries. My open mindset and curiosity allowed clear communication and learning and ultimately improved the effectiveness of the curriculum I developed. To genuinely improve inter-cultural communication, the principle of "normalizing" changing your opinion when presented with new information" is crucial. This approach fosters continuous learning, adaptability, and respect for diverse perspectives, essential qualities in navigating cross-cultural interactions.

## Don't be an arrogant jerk

Common phrases encountered by the author in the agricultural industry demonstrate cultural insensitivity or arrogance. These expressions, while often unintentionally offensive, can

create barriers to effective cross-cultural communication and cooperation. Examples of problematic statements include: “we have Mexicans”, “the Spanish come here to cash their checks”, “they should speak American/English”, “they speak Mexican”. By characterizing all non-native employees as Mexicans, one incorrectly homogenizes diverse Latin American nationalities and implies ownership, reminiscent of indentured servitude. Similarly, by characterizing a population as “Spanish”, one misuses “Spanish” as a catch-all term for Spanish-speakers, disregarding diverse nationalities. By stating non-native English speakers should “speak American” one conflates nationality with language, ignoring the multicultural nature of American society and by incorrectly identifying “Mexican” as a language, one incorrectly identifies Mexicanas as a separate language based on nationality. These examples highlight the need for increased cultural awareness and sensitivity in agricultural settings. By critically examining such phrases, we can promote more thoughtful, respectful communication and foster an inclusive work environment.

Now that one’s curiosity is piqued and one has a genuine interest to acknowledge their ignorance and a willingness to learn, I will present pertinent facts about Spanish-speaking countries and appropriate identifying terminology.

## Spanish-speaking countries

During the presentation, I will ask the audience the number of countries they think have Spanish identified as an official language. Typical responses range from 10 to 100 countries, indicating the lack of knowledge surrounding Spanish-speaking countries in the general U.S. population. Many audience members are surprised to learn there are 21 countries where Spanish is an official language.<sup>4</sup> This diversity underscores the importance of recognizing the distinct cultural identities within the Spanish-speaking world, particularly in agricultural settings where workers may come from various nations. To highlight this fact, I revisit my experience developing Spanish curriculum for the swine and poultry industries, of which I was not familiar prior to developing this curriculum. Throughout my research and informal learning experiences, I identified six different translations for “piglet”, and the various words were not only country-specific, but were sub-country specific, originating from specific regions within a country.

## Terminology to identify non-native English speakers

Understanding the diversity of the Spanish-speaking countries of the world can aid in understanding how to select the appropriate terminology to identify non-native English speakers. The use of appropriate terminology is crucial for respectful and accurate communication. Generally, there are three terms that can be used identify non-native English speakers:

- **Hispanic:** Refers to individuals from Spanish-speaking countries, including Spain, emphasizing linguistic connection. This term does not include Brazil, as the country is part of South America and speaks Portuguese.
- **Latino/Latina:** Refers to individuals from Spanish-speaking countries and Brazil but not Spain. Traditionally, “Latino” was used as a masculine or gender-neutral term, while “Latina” was specifically feminine, reflecting the gendered nature of Romance languages.

- **Latinx:** A gender-neutral alternative that has emerged to be more inclusive, avoiding the binary implications of Latino/Latina. Its usage aims to encompass all gender identities within Latin American communities.<sup>5</sup>

Selection of the appropriate terminology begs the question, “how might one know how to correctly identify a non-native English speaker if their country of origin is unknown?” The first step for effective communication may be to ask the person their country of origin in order to correctly identify them. The awareness of these nuances and a willingness to question and learn promotes more inclusive and respectful communication in diverse agricultural environments.

## Cultural significance of holidays

Holidays play a crucial role in Latino culture, offering insights into values, traditions, and historical perspectives. Understanding and respecting these celebrations can significantly enhance cross-cultural relationships in diverse agricultural settings. Key examples of holidays with major cultural significance include:

- **Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos):** A Mexican tradition honoring deceased loved ones on November 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, emphasizing the cultural value placed on family connections that transcend death. This holiday is often misinterpreted in the U.S. as “Mexican Halloween”, when it can be interpreted as a celebration of grieving. The comparison of a solemn holiday to the American celebration of Halloween can display cultural insensitivity.
- **Cinco de Mayo (May 5<sup>th</sup>):** Often misunderstood in the U.S. as Mexican Independence Day, this holiday actually commemorates the Mexican army’s victory over France at the Battle of Puebla in 1862. It is only celebrated in the tiny town of Puebla in the state of Puebla in Mexico and nowhere else in Latin America, despite its commercialization as a national holiday in the U.S.
- **Pascua (Easter):** While similar to Easter celebrations in other Christian traditions, Pascua in Latino cultures often incorporates unique customs and rituals that reflect the blending of indigenous and Catholic traditions.

When we demonstrate willingness to recognize differences and respect the significance of these holidays to non-native English speakers, we demonstrate cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, improve employer-employee relationships, enhance understanding of diverse perspectives within the workforce, and foster a more inclusive and respectful work environment. Employers and colleagues who acknowledge these cultural celebrations show respect for their Latino workers’ heritage, leading to improved workplace dynamics and cultural integration. Showing curiosity about others’ traditions creates new windows for conversation. Discovering commonalities cross-culturally demonstrates a willingness to correct ignorance and learn more about another culture.

## Learning Spanish, teaching English: A journey in cultural understanding

In our increasingly diverse society, understanding and bridging cultural differences is paramount, particularly given the growing Hispanic population in the United States. As a white American fluent in Spanish, I’ve experienced unexpected reactions when speaking the language in predominantly Hispanic

settings, highlighting the prevalence of appearance-based assumptions. This personal experience informs my approach to teaching English as a Second Language (ESL), where I emphasize the importance of mutual effort in language learning. While many Hispanic immigrants are eager to learn English, it is equally crucial for English speakers to make efforts to learn and appreciate Spanish. This reciprocal approach fosters respect and understanding, even without achieving full fluency. By meeting in the middle linguistically, we can effectively bridge cultural divides, creating a more inclusive and harmonious society that values diverse perspectives and experiences.

## Language learning

Transforming established practices requires a shift in attitudes, perspectives, and interpersonal dynamics through active engagement in language learning. Even rudimentary language skills can markedly enhance communication and convey respect. This initiative often inspires Spanish speakers to reciprocate by learning English, while also encouraging confidence in using simplified language or a blend of Spanish and English. The mutual respect that develops from these efforts strengthens professional relationships and overall communication efficacy.

Feedback from participants in my “Spanish for Agriculture” courses suggests that professional relationships between native and non-native English speakers improve when there’s an effort to learn Spanish for better communication. Students have recounted various instances where small language efforts made significant impacts. For example, a Spanish-speaking employee was elated when his English-speaking employer used Spanish numbers to sort cows. In another case, a veteran milk tester, who was a native English speaker, gained considerable respect during a single shift by using basic Spanish words with Spanish-speaking staff.

The recurring theme in this feedback is that even minimal efforts to bridge communication gaps can yield substantial positive outcomes. This underscores the importance of challenging entrenched attitudes and highlights the benefits of adopting a growth mindset in cross-cultural communication.

## Conclusion

The growing Hispanic population in the United States, especially in agriculture, calls for enhanced cultural understanding. This paper has explored terminology nuances, cultural holidays and the critical difference between ignorance and arrogance in cross-cultural interactions. Personal experiences of language barriers highlight broader communication challenges. However, these challenges present opportunities for growth. By promoting cultural awareness and advocating for mutual language learning, we can foster reciprocal respect and understanding. This “meeting in the middle” approach facilitates better communication and builds community bridges. Reaching across cultural borders requires effort and empathy, but each step taken in appreciating each other’s languages and cultures brings us closer to a truly integrated society. The journey toward cultural understanding is ongoing, but essential for creating a harmonious multicultural community.

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