

# INTRODUCTION

## introducción

When the Spanish conquistador Hernándo Cortés landed in Mexico he was confronted by a vast and complex Aztec civilisation in which Nahuatl and Mayan languages predominated. It's difficult to imagine how Cortés, with his relatively small band of followers, managed to overthrow one of the most powerful empires of its time.

The key to the conquest of Mexico was not brute force but language. As every Mexican knows, it was the indigenous mistress of Cortés – a Mayan girl known as La Malinche – who facilitated the Spanish conquest by acting as an interpreter between the warring parties. Though reviled by many as a traitor, in recent years she has been reinvented as a symbol of Mexico's unique hybrid culture.

In many ways, the multilingual La Malinche is also the mother of Mexican Spanish, a language that still bears the birthmark of the early interaction between Mexico and Europe.

### at a glance ...

**language name:**

Mexican Spanish

**names in language:**

español, castellano,  
español mexicano

**language family:** Romance

**approximate number of speakers:** 98 million

**close relatives:** Castilian Spanish, Latin American Spanish, Italian, French, Portuguese

**donations to English:**

tomato, chocolate,  
avocado, coyote

Today Mexican Spanish has evolved from that first significant encounter.

Variations in grammar and pronunciation distinguish Mexican Spanish from the Castilian Spanish spoken in Spain. Mexicans do not 'lisp' the letters *c* and *z*, as the Spanish do, and the use of the Spanish form *vosotros* ('you' plural) is limited to remote areas of the southern state of Chiapas. Perhaps the most obvious distinguishing feature of Mexican Spanish is its colloquial vocabulary

that sets it apart from Castilian Spanish, as well as the forms of Spanish spoken in neighbouring Latin American countries (see Lonely Planet's Spanish Phrasebook, Costa Rica Spanish Phrasebook and Latin American Spanish Phrasebook).

The indigenous languages that first baffled Cortés have had a considerable impact on Mexican Spanish, especially in words to do with food, flora, fauna and place names (including the word *México* itself). Nahuatl words, such as *avocado* and *tomato*, have even made it into the English language. These days US English is possibly the strongest influence on Mexican Spanish, particularly in the northern border areas where Mexicans are known to accommodate some English words in everyday conversation.

Getting acquainted with Mexican Spanish is easy. In many ways, the pronunciation is similar to English, and visitors soon fall for the beauty of the Mexican accent with its cantering rhythm and plaintive rising and falling. If you're already familiar with the Spanish spoken in Spain or elsewhere in Latin America you'll have no problem learning the basic differences, and locals will warm to your efforts to use the appropriate Mexican words and expressions.

This book gives you all the practical vocabulary and phrases you need to get by as well as all the fun, spontaneous phrases that lead to a better understanding of Mexico and its people. Need more encouragement? Remember, the contact you make using Mexican Spanish will make your travels unique. Local knowledge, new relationships and a sense of satisfaction are on the tip of your tongue, so don't just stand there, say something!

## abbreviations used in this book

**m** masculine

**f** feminine

**sg** singular

**pl** plural

**pol** polite

**inf** informal

# TOOLS > pronunciation

## herramientas de pronunciación

Mexican Spanish pronunciation isn't hard, as many sounds are similar to sounds used in English. The best way to learn the correct pronunciation is to listen carefully to people around you.

Mexican Spanish pronunciation differs from the Castilian Spanish spoken in Spain. The most obvious difference is the lack of the lisping 'th' sound which is found in Castilian Spanish. With a bit of practice you'll soon get the basics and even if you can't roll your *r*'s like Speedy González, you'll still be understood.

### vowel sounds

#### vocales

symbol	english equivalent	spanish example
a	run	<i>agua</i>
e	red	<i>número</i>
ee	bee	<i>día</i>
o	dog	<i>ojo</i>
oo	book	<i>gusto</i>

Vowels in Mexican Spanish are quite short and fairly closed. Unlike some English vowels, the sound remains level, and each vowel is pronounced as an individual unit. There are, however, a number of cases where two vowel sounds become very closely combined (so-called 'diphthongs'):

symbol	english equivalent	spanish example
ai	aisle	<i>bailar</i>
ay	say	<i>seis</i>
ow	house	<i>autobús</i>
oy	boy	<i>hoy</i>

## consonant sounds

### consonantes

symbol	english equivalent	spanish example
<b>b</b>	<b>big</b>	<b>barco</b>
<b>ch</b>	<b>chili</b>	<b>chica</b>
<b>d</b>	<b>din</b>	<b>dinero</b>
<b>f</b>	<b>fun</b>	<b>fiesta</b>
<b>g</b>	<b>go</b>	<b>gato</b>
<b>k</b>	<b>kick</b>	<b>cabeza/queso</b>
<b>kh</b>	as in the Scottish <b>loch</b>	<b>gente/jardín/México</b>
<b>l</b>	<b>loud</b>	<b>lago</b>
<b>m</b>	<b>man</b>	<b>mañana</b>
<b>n</b>	<b>no</b>	<b>nuevo</b>
<b>ny</b>	<b>canyon</b>	<b>señora</b>
<b>p</b>	<b>pig</b>	<b>padre</b>
<b>r</b>	<b>run</b> , but strongly 'rolled', especially in words with 'rr'	<b>ritmo/mariposa/burro</b>
<b>s</b>	<b>so</b>	<b>semana/Xochimilco</b>
<b>t</b>	<b>tin</b>	<b>tienda</b>
<b>v</b>	a soft 'b', halfway between 'v' and 'b'	<b>veinte</b>
<b>w</b>	<b>win</b>	<b>guardia/Oaxaca</b>
<b>y</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>llave/viaje</b>

## word stress

### énfasis

Words in Spanish have stress, which means you emphasise one syllable over another. Rule of thumb: when a written word ends in *n*, *s* or a vowel, the stress falls on the second-last syllable. Otherwise, the final syllable is stressed. If you see an accent mark over a syllable, it cancels out these rules and you just stress that syllable instead. Don't worry if you can't remember this rule – our coloured phonetic guides give you the stressed syllable in *italics*.

## plunge in!

### ¡anímate!

Don't worry too much about pronunciation. Speaking another language is a little like acting, so if you can talk the talk like Benicio del Toro you're halfway there. The coloured phonetic guides we've provided for every phrase give you all the correct sounds and the stressed syllables.

mexican spanish alphabet					
<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>j</i>	<i>kho·ta</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>er</i>
<i>b</i>	<i>be lar·ga</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>ka</i>	<i>rr</i>	<i>e·re</i>
<i>c</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>l</i>	<i>e·le</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>e·se</i>
<i>ch</i>	<i>che</i>	<i>ll</i>	<i>do·ble e·le</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>te</i>
<i>d</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>e·me</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>oo</i>
<i>e</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>e·ne</i>	<i>v</i>	<i>be kor·ta</i>
<i>f</i>	<i>e·fe</i>	<i>ñ</i>	<i>e·nye</i>	<i>w</i>	<i>do·ble be</i>
<i>g</i>	<i>khe</i>	<i>o</i>	<i>o</i>	<i>x</i>	<i>e·kees</i>
<i>h</i>	<i>a·che</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>pe</i>	<i>y</i>	<i>ee·grye·ga</i>
<i>i</i>	<i>ee</i>	<i>q</i>	<i>koo</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>se·ta</i>

## spellbound

The relationship between Mexican Spanish sounds and their spelling is quite straightforward and consistent. The following rules will help you read any written Mexican Spanish you may come across:

<b>c</b>	before <i>e</i> or <i>i</i> pronounced as the 's' in 'so' before <i>a</i> , <i>o</i> and <i>u</i> pronounced as the 'k' in 'kick'	<b>cerveza, cinco</b> <b>carro, corto, cubo</b>
<b>g</b>	before <i>e</i> or <i>i</i> pronounced as the 'ch' in 'loch' – a harsh, breathy sound	<b>gigante</b>
<b>gue, gui</b>	pronounced as the 'g' in 'go' (the <i>u</i> is not pronounced in these combinations unless there are two dots over the <i>u</i> )	<b>guerra, Guillermo, güiski</b>
<b>h</b>	never pronounced (silent)	<b>haber</b>
<b>j</b>	harsh and breathy as the 'ch' in 'loch' in 'loch'	<b>jardín</b>
<b>ll</b>	pronounced as the 'y' in 'yes'	<b>llave</b>
<b>ñ</b>	pronounced as the 'ny' in 'canyon'	<b>niño</b>
<b>qu</b>	pronounced as the 'k' in 'kick' ( <i>u</i> is not pronounced)	<b>quince</b>
<b>x</b>	usually pronounced as the 'ch' in 'loch' in 'loch' as an 's' in some indigenous place names as a 'ks' in other words (See also the box on page 84)	<b>México</b> <b>Xochimilco</b> <b>próximo</b>
<b>z</b>	pronounced as the 's' in 'soup'	<b>zorro</b>