

A New
Reference
Grammar
of Modern
Spanish

J O H N B U T T &
C A R M E N B E N J A M I N

THIRD EDITION

immortal 'immortal', total, etc. Exceptions: *mismo/mismísimo* 'very' (la *mismísima* persona 'the very same person'), *singular/singularísimo* 'singular'.

(g) Time and number adjectives: *anual* 'annual', *diario* 'daily', *nocturno* 'night-time', *semanal* 'weekly', *quinto* 'fifth', *último* 'last', *vigésimo* 'twentieth', etc. Exception: *primer/primero* 'first'/'very first of all'.

(h) *Hirviendo* 'boiling' and *ardiendo* 'burning'.

(i) Technical and scientific adjectives and most adjectives ending in *-ista*, e.g. *atmosférico*, *termonuclear* 'thermo-nuclear', *transformacional* 'transformational', *comunista* 'Communist', *nacionalista* 'nationalist', etc.

4.9.3 Irregular intensive forms

(a) The following are best learned as separate words:

<i>antiguo</i> : antiquísimo ancient	<i>lejos</i> : lejísimo far (adverb)
<i>cursi</i> : cursilísimo affected/pseudo-refined	<i>mayor</i> : máximo supreme/greatest
<i>inferior</i> : ínfimo (literary)	<i>menor</i> : mínimo slightest/least
<i>inferior</i> /least/lowest	<i>mejor</i> : óptimo superb (literary)
<i>joven</i> : juvenísimo young	<i>peor</i> : pésimo bad/dreadful
	<i>superior</i> : supremo superior/supreme

Note

Augmentative forms ending in *-ón* insert a *c*: *guapetón* 'handsome'/'good-looking' > *guapetoncísimo*, *jugueterón* 'playful' > *jugueteroncísimo*, but they are rarely used.

(b) The following forms are occasionally found in older texts and or in flowery written styles, e.g. formal speeches:

	Literary form	Current form
<i>amigo</i>	friendly/keen	<i>amiguisimo</i>
<i>aspero</i>	harsh	<i>asperisimo</i>
<i>bendito</i>	charitable	none
<i>celebre</i>	famous	none
<i>cruel</i>	cruel	<i>cruelísimo</i>
<i>difícil</i>	difficult	<i>difícilísimo</i>
<i>fácil</i>	easy	<i>facilísimo</i>
<i>fértil</i>	fertile	<i>fertilísimo</i>
<i>fiel</i>	faithful	<i>fielísimo</i>
<i>frío</i>	cold	<i>fríoísimo</i>
<i>íntegro</i>	whole/entire	<i>íntegroísimo</i>
<i>libre</i>	free	<i>libreísimo</i> (familiar)
<i>magnífico</i>	magnificent	none
<i>misero</i>	wretched (archaic)	none?
<i>munífico</i>	munificent	none
<i>pobre</i>	poor	<i>pobrisimo</i>
<i>sabio</i>	wise	none
<i>sagrado</i>	sacred	none
		<i>sacratísimo</i>

<i>bueno</i>	<i>buenísimo</i>	<i>buenísimo</i>	good
<i>cierto</i>	<i>ciertísimo</i>	<i>ciertísimo</i>	certain
<i>diestro</i>	<i>diestrisimo</i>	<i>diestrisimo</i>	skilled
<i>fuerte</i>	<i>fuertísimo</i>	<i>fuertísimo</i>	strong
<i>reciente</i>	<i>recientísimo</i>	<i>recientísimo</i>	recent
<i>tierno</i>	<i>tiernísimo</i>	<i>tiernísimo</i>	tender

The diphthong in some words has never suffered modification, e.g. *viejo/viejísimo* 'old', *cuervo/cuerdísimo* 'sane'.

4.10 Use of nouns as adjectives

Nouns may occasionally be used adjectivally:

<i>Tienes que ser más persona decente</i>	You've got to be more of a decent person
<i>Este libro es menos novela que el otro</i>	This book is less of a novel than the other
<i>Es más ballarina que actriz</i>	She's more a dancer than an actress
<i>Su reacción es puro teatro</i>	His reaction is pure theatre

Such nouns do not agree in number or gender with the word they modify, and when they are modified by words like *más*, *menos*, *tan* they are not accompanied by a definite or indefinite article. See 3.3.11 for the indefinite article to distinguish nouns from adjectives, e.g. *es imbecil* and *es un imbecil*. See 24.4.4 for nouns and adjectives modified by *qué*: *¡qué bandido eres!*, what a villain you are!; *¡qué guapa estás!* 'wow, you look great!'

4.11 Position of adjectives in relation to nouns

4.11.1 General

For the position of *alguno*, *ninguno*, *cualquiera*, *mismo*, possessive adjectives, etc., consult these words in the index. For the position of ordinal number-adjectives, e.g. *primero* 'first', *séxta* 'sixth', see 10.12.3.

It is hardly true to say that the adjective 'normally' follows the noun in Spanish. Adjective position is much more flexible than in English and a good deal more flexible than in French, but the underlying rules are difficult to formulate. Many factors of convention, sound and above all style and meaning combine to determine whether, for example, one says *un lejano ruido* or *un ruido lejano* 'a distant noise'. Moreover there seem to be as yet unresearched differences between Peninsular and American Spanish, the latter apparently allowing some preposed constructions unacceptable in Spain. The basic rule for all adjectives other than ordinal numbers seems to be:

- Restrictive adjectives follow the noun.
- Non-restrictive adjectives may precede or follow the noun. Some always precede the noun.

Restrictive adjectives narrow the scope of the noun that precedes them: *vino*

apetitosa cocina británica 'unappetizing British cooking' are both generalizations that attribute a quality to every member or aspect of the class of things denoted by the noun. Unfortunately the distinction between restrictive and non-restrictive adjectives is not always clear, and the decision about where to put the adjective often relies on a feel for the language rare among non-natives.

As a useful, though not absolutely foolproof guide to whether an adjective is restrictive, native speakers of English may apply the following test: if an English adjective sounds correct when spoken with a heavy stress (or, more accurately, with falling intonation) – 'I don't like **sour** apples, but I do like **sweet** apples' – then it is almost certainly restrictive and its Spanish equivalent will follow the noun: *no me gustan las manzanas agrias, pero sí me gustan las manzanas dulces*. If an English adjective sounds wrong if it is stressed it is probably non-restrictive and its Spanish counterpart may well precede the noun. Thus if one stresses 'beautiful' in 'the beautiful sun of Spain', the phrase suggests that there is another Spanish sun that is not beautiful: the absurdity of this strongly suggests that the Spanish adjective precedes the noun: *el hermoso sol de España*. Ordinal number adjectives do not follow this rule, cf. *está en el quinto capítulo*, *no en el cuarto* 'it's in the fifth chapter, not in the fourth'. See 10.12.3.

4.11.2 Examples of restrictive (post-posed) adjectives

The following adjectives are restrictive and therefore always follow the noun:

- (a) Those that create a new type or sub-set of the thing described by the noun:
- | | |
|--|---|
| <i>el pan integral</i> wholemeal bread | <i>las teorías freudianas</i> Freudian theories |
| <i>el papel secante</i> blotting paper | <i>la tracción delantera</i> front-wheel drive |
| <i>los cazas computerizados</i> computerized | fighter aircraft |

All the other examples in this section are in fact instances of this type of adjective, which can be thought of as a transformed clause: *la poesía romántica* = *aquellos poemas que es romántica*, *las manzanas verdes* = *aquellas manzanas que están verdes*.

- (b) Those used for purposes of contrast, whether explicit or implied:

<i>Tráigame una cuchara limpia, no una sucia</i>	Bring me a clean spoon, not a dirty one
<i>Tengo un boli verde y otro azul</i>	I have a green ballpoint pen and a blue one
<i>Adoro los ojos azules</i>	I adore blue eyes
<i>No queremos agua salada</i>	We don't want salty water

- (c) Scientific or technical adjectives used to define or specify a noun (as is almost always the case):

<i>la gramática transformativa</i>	<i>el laboratorio lingüístico</i> language
transformational grammar	laboratory
<i>la crítica estructuralista</i> structuralist	<i>el correo electrónico</i> e-mail 'emilio' is a
criticism	new colloquialism for an e-mail in Spain)

Only the most far-fetched styles would use such adjectives poetically or as epithets, though some, e.g. *unilateral*, *microscópico*, (*p*)*sicoanalítico*, *materialista*, might conceivably be used as value judg(e)ments (see 4.11.3).

<i>la nave espacial</i> space ship	<i>el material bélico</i> war material
<i>el túnel ferroviario</i> railway tunnel	(= <i>material de guerra</i>)
<i>la guerra nuclear</i> nuclear war	

- (e) Adjectives of nationality, which are almost always restrictive:

<i>el clima argentino</i>	the Argentinian climate
<i>la paella valenciana</i>	paella
<i>los monumentos mayas</i>	the Mayan monuments

Note

Adjectives of nationality may occasionally be used as epithets (because they express allegedly typical qualities. See 4.11.4 for a discussion of epithets): *mi española impulsividad me hace escribir estas líneas* (reader's letter in *Cambio* 6, Spain) 'my Spanish impulsiveness makes me write these lines', *su británica reserva* 'her/his British reserve'.

4.11.3 Pre-posed (non-restrictive) adjectives indicating impression, reaction, subjective evaluation

The most common reason for putting an adjective before the noun is to emphasize its emotional content, e.g. *una tremenda tragedia* 'a tremendous tragedy', *un gran poeta* 'a great poet', *el inquietante problema del efecto invernadero* 'the worrying problem of the greenhouse effect'. These adjectives are non-restrictive in con-text because the speaker wishes to eliminate any allusion to another tragedy, poet or problem: no contrast with other nouns is suggested since, in the foregoing quotation, no allusion is made to a non-worrying greenhouse effect. Native speakers often report that such adjectives are in some way 'emphatic', but this is misleading since in the English translation the adjective is definitely not stressed, as explained at 4.11.1.

Such pre-posed adjectives may describe the speaker's impression, assessment or evaluation of a thing, or its appearance. They can include a vast range of adjectives indicating shape, distance, size, colo(u)r, texture, passage of time, praise, blame or subjective appraisal of any kind. Emotional language, e.g. literary, solemn or poetic styles, journalism and advertising, particularly favo(u)r pre-posed adjectives:

<i>las magníficas ruinas de Machu Picchu</i>	the magnificent ruins at/of Machu Picchu
<i>¡No voy a permitir que a tu hija la crucen con las ideas de tu enferma cabeza!</i> (L. Esquivel, Mexico)	I'm not going to let you poison your daughter with the ideas of your diseased brain!
<i>un profesor, dueño de una amplísima cultura</i> (S. Pitlor, Mexico, dialogue)	a teacher, a highly educated man
<i>¡Sensacional oferta de verano!</i>	Sensational Summer Offer!

Sometimes the difference of meaning between post-posed and pre-posed adjectives can be significant, as in *el poético lenguaje de Lorca* 'the poetic language of Lorca' (aesthetic judg(e)ment) and *el lenguaje poético de Lorca* 'the language of Lorca's poetry' (factual), or *las decimonónicas actitudes del ministro* 'the nineteenth-century attitudes of the minister' (value judg(e)ment) and *la novela decimonónica* 'the nineteenth-century novel' (factual). But very often a pre-posed adjective is merely more poetic or dramatic: a post-posed one more matter-of-fact. The fol-

<i>el casi olvidado nombre de James MacPherson</i> (J. L. Borges, Argentina)	the almost forgotten name of James MacPherson
<i>Hay barcos anclados en permanente contacto con los aviones nocturnos</i> (G. García Márquez, Colombia, dialogue)	There are boats anchored at sea in permanent contact with the night aircraft
<i>Si usted me hace serenas preguntas, tendré serenas respuestas</i> (interview in <i>Genie</i> , Argentina)	If you ask me calm questions, you'll get calm answers
<i>La revolución significó para mí una justa redistribución de la riqueza</i> (M. Vargas Llosa, Peru)	The revolution meant for me a just redistribution of wealth
<i>una guirnalda de blancas flores</i> (L. Goytisolo, Spain)	a wreath of white flowers
<i>La pera es de fácil digestión</i> (cookery book, Spain)	Pears are easily digested
<i>el creciente costo de la tierra urbana</i>	The rising cost of land within the cities

Notes

(i) Adjective position is arbitrarily fixed in many set phrases: *Alto Egipto* 'Upper Egypt', *el Sumo Pontífice* 'the Pope', *Baja California* 'Lower California' (cf. *América Central*, *los Estados Unidos*, *la China Popular*, *People's China*, etc.), *altos hornos* 'blast furnaces', *en alta mar* 'on the high seas', *Dios Todopoderoso* 'Almighty God', *sentido común* 'common sense', *gramática parda* 'smartness/cunning', etc.

(ii) If an adjective is qualified by an adverb it usually follows the noun in ordinary styles: esta noticia altamente reveladora 'this highly revealing news item', una chica frigidamente agresiva, 'a frigidly aggressive girl', con tres amigos igualmente ruidosos 'with three equally stinky friends'. Compare *anuncian una útil linterna* (not *linterna útil*) 'they are advertising a useful torch' and *anuncian una linterna muy útil* 'they are advertising a very useful torch'.

With más and menos either position is possible: *el más popular presentador de la TV italiana* (*Cambio 16*, Spain) 'the most popular presenter on Italian TV', or *el presentador más popular de la TV española*.

Constructions like *la altamente reveladora noticia* 'the highly revealing news item', *la siempre inquietu juventud* 'ever restless youth', *esa siempre sorprendente inteligencia de los perros* (S. Galindo, Mexico) 'that ever-surprising intelligence of dogs', *las ya de por sí interesantes confesiones del autor* 'the in themselves interesting confessions of the author', *la sorprendente y para Julían desconocida noticia* (J. Aldecoa, Spain) 'the surprising and – for Julian – unknown news' are, however, found in literary style and can be explained in terms of contrast between restrictive and non-restrictive adjectives.

(iii) Nouns with two or more adjectives: the restrictive adjective follows, the non-restrictive normally precedes: *los blancos ejércitos angelicos* 'the white armies of the angels', *una elegante camisa blanca* 'an elegant white shirt', *una siniestra cruz gamada* 'a sinister swastika', *una enorme cúpula blanca* 'an enormous white dome'.

4.11.4 Other uses of pre-posed non-restrictive adjectives

The following types of non-restrictive adjectives are also pre-posed:

(a) Epithets, i.e. adjectives used to describe qualities typically associated with the noun. These are infrequent in everyday or scientific or technical language, except in set phrases, but they are very common in literary, poetic or other types of emotive or affective language:

<i>un valiente torero</i> <i>los volubles dioses romanos</i>	a brave bullfighter the fickle Roman gods
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Epithets describe predictable or typical qualities: one can say *un enorme elefante* 'an enormous elephant' but only *un elefante cojo* 'a lame elephant' since lameness is not typical of elephants and bigness is; *mi leal amigo* 'my loyal friend' but only *mi amigo vegetariano* 'my vegetarian friend'; *un difícil problema* or *un problema difícil* 'a difficult problem', but only *un problema (p)sicológico*, since problems are not typically psychological.

(b) Adjectives that unambiguously refer to every one of the items denoted by a plural noun: *lucio que parar en boxes para cambiar sus deterioradas ruedas* (El País, Spain) 'he had to stop in the pits to change his worn tyres (US 'tires')' (*ruedas deterioradas* might imply that only some of his tyres were worn):

<i>muchas gracias por las magníficas rosas</i> (<i>rosas magníficas</i> suggests that some of the roses were not magnificent)	many thanks for the magnificent roses
<i>Sus evasivos respuestas empezaban a irritarme</i>	His/Her evasive replies were starting to irritate me
<i>las simpáticas peticiones de nuestros oyentes</i>	our listeners' kind requests

For this reason, adjectives applied to unique entities are likely to be pre-posed, unless they apply only to an aspect or part of the thing:

<i>Se veía el imponente Everest</i> <i>el izquierdista Fronte Farabundo Martí</i> <i>tu alarmante edad</i> ... (you have only one age)	One could see imposing Mount Everest the left-wing Farabundo Martí Front your alarming age ...
--	--

But

<i>Existe un Unamuno político y comprometido, y otro contemplativo</i>	There is a political, committed Unamuno, and another, contemplative one
--	---

(c) Intensifiers, hyperboles and swear words – which are extreme examples of adjectives used emotively and often stripped of all real meaning:

<i>mi negra suerte</i> <i>¡esta maldita máquina de escribir!</i> <i>Valiente soldado eres tú</i> <i>tu dichosa familia</i> <i>estas condenadas hormigas</i> <i>cien cochinos/piojosos pesetas</i> (vulgar)	my rotten luck this damned typewriter! A great soldier you are (I don't think ...) your blessed family these damned ants 100 lousy pesetas
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4.11.5 Position of adjectives with compound nouns

Choice of position here depends on whether the noun phrase is felt to be a compound word (i.e. a new concept) or merely a loose conjunction of words. Thus *las flores de España* 'the flowers of Spain' is not a compound, so one says *las flores silvestres de España* 'the wild flowers of Spain' not **las flores de España silvestres*. But *una casa de muñecas* 'a doll's house' is a compound and is inseparable: *una casa de muñecas barata* 'a cheap dolls' house', not **una casa barata de muñecas*. Only long familiarity with Spanish provides a certain guide as to what is or is not a compound noun. Some noun phrases are uncertain: one can say *una bicicleta*

- un cochecito de niño verde
 un misántrope de cabecera simpático
 un libro lleno de curiosas referencias de índole personal (J. L. Borges, Argentina)

- a green pram/baby carriage
 a nice family doctor
 a book full of curious references of a personal nature

4.11.6 Position of bueno, malo, grande, pequeño

The general rule applies: when they are clearly restrictive, they follow the noun. When used restrictively, they usually indicate objective qualities. When they precede the noun they usually express a subjective evaluation (which is usually the case, but see note (iv) for the special case of *pequeño*).

(a) Objective qualities

- Tengo un abrigo bueno para los fines de semana, y uno regular para los laborables
 Oscar Wilde dijo que no hay libros buenos o malos sino libros bien o mal escritos
 (J. L. Borges, Argentina, contrast)
 Ponlo debajo del árbol grande
 Tráe la llave grande
 Era un hombre grande
 mi hermana mayor/menor

- I've got a good coat for weekends, and a so-so one for weekdays
 Oscar Wilde said there are no good or bad books, only well or badly written books
 Put it under the big tree
 Bring the big key/spanner
 He was a big man
 my elder/younger sister

(b) Subjective qualities

- un buen carpintero
 un gran éxito
 un gran ruido/poeta/embustero
 los grandes narcotraficantes
 un pequeño problema (see note (iv))
 el mayor poeta mexicano
 ni la menor impresión de insinceridad/insincerity

- a good carpenter
 a great success
 a great noise/poet/fraud
 the major drug dealers
 a slight problem
 the greatest Mexican poet
 not even the slightest impression of

Notes

- (i) With *hombre* and *mujer*, *bueno* tends to mean 'good' after the noun and 'harmless' before: *un buen hombre* means 'a harmless/simple man'. *Malo* is weaker before the noun, e.g. *pasamos un mal rato* 'we had a bad time'. *Mala mujer* may be a euphemism for prostitute.
 (ii) There are many set expressions: *lo hizo de buena gana* 'he did it willingly', *oro de buena ley* 'pure gold', *en buen lío* 'he has meted out a fine mess', *a mi siempre me pone buena cara* 'he always makes an effort to be nice with me', *¡qué mala pata!* 'what bad luck', etc.
 (iii) *Grande* is pre-posed when it means 'great', but it may mean 'big' in either position.
 (iv) *Un pequeño problema* is normal since 'problem' is an abstract noun. However, *una pequeña casa* is not usual for 'a little house', which is *una casita*. For discussion of this phenomenon see 38.2.

4.11.7 Position of nuevo and viejo

The usual explanation is that these are pre-posed when they mean 'another' and 'previous'/'long-standing' respectively, but in practice it is doubtful whether the distinction is always clear-cut: *tenemos un nuevo presidente/un presidente nuevo* 'we've got a new president', *nuevos progresos técnicos* 'new (i.e. more) technological developments', *un viejo amigo* 'an old friend' (i.e. long-

new car', *un coche viejo* 'an old car'. But *viejo* may be pre-posed when it means 'not young': *un viejo americano* 'an old American'. This distinction is overridden for purposes of contrast: *prefiero el coche nuevo al viejo* 'I prefer our new (i.e. 'latest') car to the old (i.e. 'previous') one'.

4.11.8 Adjectives whose meaning varies according to position

The following are some common cases of changes of meaning determined by adjective position, but in many cases the distinction is not rigid and a good dictionary should be consulted for further information:

After noun	Before noun
<i>antiguo</i>	former or ancient
<i>medio</i>	half
<i>pobre</i>	poor (= not rich)
<i>puro</i>	pure/clean
<i>raro</i>	strange/rare
<i>rico</i>	rich
<i>simple</i>	simple-minded
<i>triste</i>	sad
<i>valiente</i>	courageous
<i>varios</i>	assorted/various
	delicious
	simple (= mere)
	wretched
	'great' (ironic)
	several

Note

For mismo see 9.11, propio 9.14, sólo/solo 9.15.

4.11.9 Adjectives that occur only in front of the noun

The following phrases contain adjectives that normally occur only in front of a noun:

<i>Lo haré en ambos casos</i>	I'll do it in both cases
<i>las llamadas democracias</i>	the so-called 'democracies'
<i>la mera mención del asunto</i>	the mere mention of the topic
<i>Llevará mucho dinero</i>	He was carrying a lot of money
<i>Busquemos otro médico</i>	Let's look for another doctor
<i>Me dejó en pleno centro</i>	He left me right in the town centre (US 'center', 'downtown')
<i>el presunto culpable</i>	the allegedly guilty person
<i>pocas veces</i>	rarely
<i>poca paciencia</i>	little patience
<i>el pretendido autor</i>	the alleged/supposed author
<i>un sedicente budista</i>	a self-styled Buddhist
<i>Trajeron sendos paquetes (literary)</i>	'They brought a parcel each
<i>ante tanta tontería</i>	in the face of such a great act of stupidity
<i>No puedo comer tanta cantidad</i>	I can't eat such a quantity

4.12 Attributive adjectives

'Attributive' adjectives are adjectives that replace *de* plus a noun: *la vida familiar* is another way of saying *la vida de familia* 'family life'. Spanish readily forms attributive adjectives from nouns cf. *mañana* 'morning' > *matinal* (la televisión