

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

cala [tʃashkála], Xcaret [shkarét]. However, x is pronounced like Spanish j in some other Mexican place names, e.g. *México*, Oaxaca. See 4.8.1 note (iv).

Non-Castilian spellings	Pronounced as
j (Catalan, Galician)	s in 'pleasure'
j (Basque)	Spanish j
g before i, e (Catalan, Galician)	s in 'pleasure'
g (Basque)	g in English 'get'
h (Catalan, Galician, Basque)	silent, as in Spanish
tx (Basque, Catalan)	Spanish ch
ny (Catalan)	Spanish ñ
ll (Catalan)	double l (not as Spanish ll)
x (Catalan, Galician, Basque)	sh
tz (Basque)	ts
-aig, -eig, -oig, -uig (Catalan)	-ach, -ech, -och, -uch
z (Catalan)	like English z
z (Basque)	like Spanish s

## 39.2 The written accent

The Academy and many grammarians call both the curly sign over an *ñ* and the acute accent (´) *una tilde*, a word which in everyday language usually refers only to the sign over *ñ*. *El acento* properly means 'stress' in linguistic usage, but in ordinary language it also means 'written accent'.

### 39.2.1 General rules

Native Spanish-speakers are rather careless about the use of the written accent in handwriting, but in printing and formal writing the rules must be observed.

The basic rule is: if a word is stressed regularly, no written accent is required. If a word is stressed irregularly, the position of the stress must be shown by an acute accent on the stressed vowel. Stress is regular:

- (a) if the word ends in a consonant other than *n* or *s* and the stress falls on the last syllable;
- (b) if the word ends in a vowel or *n* or *s* and the stress falls on the penultimate syllable.

The following words therefore have regular stress and require no written accent:

*la calle* street  
*la cama* bed  
*contestad* answer (*vosotros* imperative)  
*el coñac* brandy  
*denle* give him (*ustedes* imperative)  
*la imagen* image  
*el jueves* Thursday  
*Madrid*

*natural* natural  
*(el) Paraguay*  
*redondo* round (adjective)  
*el reloj* (pronounced *reló*) clock/watch  
*el sacacorchos* corkscrew  
*la tribu* tribe  
*la virgen* virgin  
*volver* return

The following are stressed irregularly and must have a written accent:

<i>el álbum</i> album	<i>las imágenes</i> images
<i>alérgicamente</i> allergically	<i>la nación</i> nation
<i>contéstenseles</i> answer them ( <i>ustedes</i> imperative)	<i>la química</i> chemistry
<i>decídmelo</i> tell me it ( <i>vosotros</i> imperative)	<i>el récord</i> record (in sports, etc.)
<i>difícil</i> difficult	<i>el rehén</i> hostage
<i>dirán</i> they will say (from <i>decir</i> )	<i>la/las síntesis</i> synthesis/syntheses
<i>fácil</i> easy	<i>las vírgenes</i> virgins

**Notes**

- (i) It follows from the rule that all Spanish words stressed more than two syllables from the end must be stressed irregularly, so they all have an accent: *díganmelo*, *teléfono*, *parasítico*, etc.  
(ii) Words ending in two consonants of which the second is *s* (all of them foreign words) are regularly stressed on the last syllable: *Orleans*, *los complots* 'plots', *los cabarets* 'cabarets'. *Ellos* *forceps* 'forceps', *ellos bíceps* 'biceps', *ellos récords* are exceptions.

**39.2.2 Diphthongs, triphthongs and the position of the stress accent**

Spanish vowels are divided into two classes:

**(1) Strong**

*a, e, o*  
*i* when pronounced as in *ti*  
*u* when pronounced as in *tú*

**(2) Semi-vowels**

*i* when pronounced [y]  
*u* when pronounced [w]

Vowels may appear in combinations of two or three, e.g. *ea*, *au*, *uai*, *iai*, etc. An intervening *h* is disregarded, so that *au* and *ahu*, *eu* and *ehu*, *ai* and *ahi*, etc. are treated the same way (at least since the publication of the Academy's *Nuevas normas* in 1959).

When two or more **strong** vowels appear side by side, they are pronounced as separate syllables<sup>4</sup> and do not form diphthongs or triphthongs:

*leo* [lé-o] I read  
*créamelo* [kré-amelo] believe me  
*pasee* [pasé-e] subjunctive of *pasear*  
 'to go for a walk'

*moho* [mó-o] rust/mildew  
*Seoane* [se-o-á-ne] (a surname)  
*creí* [kre-í] I believed  
*aún* [a-ún] still/yet

A combination, in either order, of a **strong vowel** plus a **semi-vowel** creates a diphthong and is counted as a single vowel for the purpose of finding the position of the written accent. Therefore the following words are stressed predictably:

*arduo* [árðwo] arduous  
*continuo* [kontínwo] continuous  
*erais* [éray] you were

*la lengua* [laléngwa] tongue/language

*Francia* [fránθya/fránsya] France  
*la historia* [laystórya] history/story  
*produjisteis* [proðuxisteys] you produced  
*hablabais* [aβláβays] you were speaking

and the following words have unpredictable stress and require a written accent:

<sup>4</sup> Adjacent strong vowels are in fact usually run together in rapid speech and pronounced as one syllable, a phenomenon known as *syneresis* when it occurs inside a word and *synalepha* when it occurs between words. Thus *león* is often pronounced [león] (one syllable) rather than [le-ón] and *la unión* is almost always pronounced [lawnyón] (two syllables); but this has no effect on spelling.

*amáis* [amáys] you love  
*debéis* [debéys] you owe  
*hacías* [aθías/asías] you were doing

*volvió* [bolβyó] he/she returned  
*continúo* [kontinú-o] I continue  
*ella respondía* [eθarrespondía] she was answering

If a semi-vowel is added to a diphthong, a triphthong is formed. Triphthongs are also counted as a single vowel for the purpose of determining where a written accent should appear:

*continúais* [kontinwáys]  
*vieiras* [byéyras]  
*cambiáis* [kambyáys]

you continue (three syllables)  
 scallops (Spain only; two syllables)  
 you change (two syllables)

### Note

Students of Portuguese should remember that Portuguese has very different rules and writes *colónia*, *história*, but *temia* (all stressed the same as Spanish *colonia*, *historia*, *temía*).

### 39.2.3 Written accent on stressed diphthongs and combinations of strong vowels

If one of a group of combined vowels is stressed, the written accent may or may not appear on it. There are three possibilities:

(a) If the combination is **strong vowel** and **semi-vowel** (in either order) the stress falls predictably on the strong vowel, so the following require no written accent:

*vais* [báys] you go (*vosotros* form)  
*el aire* [eláyre] the air  
*veis* [béys] you see (*vosotros* form)  
*el peine* [elpéyne] comb  
*fui* [fwí] I was  
*huido* [wíðo] fled (past part. of *huir* 'to flee')  
*la ruína* [larrwína] ruin  
*tiene* [tyéne] (s)he has (from *tener*)  
*luego* [lwéyo] then/after  
*cuenta* [kwénta] (s)he counts

*la causa* [lakáwsa] cause  
*Palau* [paláw] (personal surname)  
*Berneu* [bernéw] (personal surname)  
*alcaloide* [alkalóyðe] alkaloid  
*la tiara* [latyára] tiara  
*acuoso* [akwóso] watery  
*vio* [byó] (s)he saw  
*dio* [dyó] (s)he gave  
*el pie* [elpyé] foot  
*la viuda* [laβyúða] widow

and the following are exceptions:

*el país* [elpa-ís] country  
*el baúl* [elβa-úl] trunk/car boot (US 'car trunk')  
*aún* [a-ún] still/yet (pronounced differently from *aun*, 'even')  
*reír* [rre-ír] to laugh  
*reís* [rre-ís] you (*vosotros*) laugh  
*el dúo* [eldú-o] duet/duo  
*el búho* [elβú-o] owl

*frío* [frí-o] cold  
*reúne* [rre-úne] he reunites  
*prohíbe* [pro-íβe] he prohibits  
*heroína* [ero-ína] heroine/heroin  
*el arcaísmo* [arka-ísmo] archaism  
*ahí* [a-í] there  
*oís* [o-ís] you (*vosotros*) hear  
*ríe* [rrí-e] (s)he laughs (from *reír*)  
*se fía* [sefí-a] (s)he trusts (from *fiarse*)

(b) If the combination is **strong vowel** + **strong vowel** the two vowels form separate syllables, so the following are stressed predictably:

*los jacarandaes* [losχakarandá-es]  
 jacaranda trees (plural of *el jacarandá*)  
*los noes* [losnó-es] noes (plural of 'no')

*feo* [fé-o] ugly  
*leen* [lé-en] they read  
*la boa* [laβó-a] boa (the snake may be *el boa* in Latin America)

*el caos* [elká-os] chaos  
*ahonda* [a-ónda] (s)he deepens  
*el moho* [elmó-o] rust/mildew

and the following are exceptions:

*aéreo* [a-éreo] air (adjective)  
*el león* [elle-ón] lion

*el deán* [elde-án] dean (ecclesiastical)  
*el rehén* [elrre-én] hostage

### Notes

(i) *Huido*, *construido* and other words ending in *-uido* are stressed regularly (because the *ui* is a diphthong), whereas words like *creído* 'believed' (past participle of *creer*) and *reído* 'laughed' (past participle of *reír*) are written with an accent because they fall under the exceptions to (a) (the *i* is not pronounced like 'y').

(ii) Accented forms like *rió* [rri-ó] 'he laughed', *lió* [li-ó] 'he tied in a bundle', *huís* [u-ís] 'you (vosotros) flee', *huí* [u-í] 'I fled', etc., are apparent exceptions to rule that the strong vowel is predictably stressed in the combination semi-vowel + strong vowel: compare *fui* 'I was', *fue* '(s)he was', *vio* '(s)he saw', *dio* '(s)he gave'. Words like *rió*, *lió*, *fió* are given a written accent to show that the two vowels are pronounced separately, whereas *vio*, *dio*, *fui* and *fue* are pronounced as monosyllabic words [byó], [dyó], [fwí], [fwé]. Compare the pronunciation of *pie* 'foot' [pyé] with *pié* [pi-é], first-person preterite of *piar* 'to cheep' (like a bird: two syllables).

(iii) As mentioned in 39.2.2, a triphthong is treated like a single vowel for the purpose of determining the position of the stress, so that *continúais* [kontinwáys] (from *continuar* 'to continue') is in fact an exception and must be written with the accent.

(iv) When, as sometimes happens in archaic or very flowery styles, an object pronoun is added to a finite verb form other than an imperative, an original written accent is retained: *acabó* + *se* = *acabóse* for *se acabó* 'it ended': see 11.14.1 note (ii) for a discussion of this construction. This spelling rule leads to the inconsistency of a normally stressed vowel bearing a written accent.

However, when a pronoun is added to an imperative the accent is not written if it becomes unnecessary, e.g. *dé* 'give' but *deme* 'give me', *detén* 'stop' but *detenlos* 'stop them'.

(v) If a word bearing a written accent is joined to another to form a compound, the original written accent is discarded: *tío* + *vivo* = *tiovivo* 'merry-go-round', *balón* + *cesto* = *baloncesto* 'basketball', etc.

### 39.2.4 Written accent: some common doubtful cases

The following forms are recommended (where *el/la* precedes the noun it may refer to a male or a female; when no accent is written the stressed vowel is shown in bold>).

*la acrobacia* acrobatics  
*afrodisíaco* aphrodisiac  
*amoniaco* ammonia  
*austriaco* Austrian  
*cardíaco* cardiac  
*el/la chófer* driver (see note i)  
*el cóctel* cocktail  
*demoníaco* or *demoníaco* demonic;  
 likewise other words ending in  
*-íaco* / *íaco*, the unaccented form being  
 more common  
*la dinamo* dynamo (see note ii)  
*disponte* familiar imperative of  
*disponerse* 'get ready' (see note iii)  
*el electrodo* electrode  
*etíope* Ethiopian

*la exégesis* or *la exegesis* exegesis  
*el frijól* bean (see note iv)  
*el fútbol* soccer (see note v)  
*el géiser* geyser (geological)  
*hipocondríaco* hypochondriac (see  
*demoníaco* above)  
*ibero* (less commonly *íbero*) Iberian  
*el láser* laser  
*la metempsicosis* metempsychosis  
*el meteoro* meteor  
*el misil* (less commonly *mísil*) missile  
*la olimpiada* Olympiad  
*la orgía* orgy  
*la ósmosis* or *osmosis* osmosis  
*el pabilo* wick (of a candle)  
*el parásito* parasite

*el/la pediatra* paediatrician/(US pediatrician)  
*el periodo* or *período* period  
*el/la políglota* polyglot  
*el/la psiquiatra* psychiatrist  
*policiaco* police (adjective; see *demoniaco* above)  
*la quiromancia* palmistry/hand-reading (see note vi)  
*el rádar* radar

*el reptil* reptile  
*el reuma* rheumatism (everyday usage prefers *el reuma*)  
*el sánscrito* Sanskrit  
*el termostato* thermostat  
*la torticólis* stiff neck  
*la utopía* utopia  
*el zodiaco* zodiac (see *demoniaco* above)

Some 'mispronunciations' are usual in speech, e.g. *el soviet* 'Soviet', *el oceano* 'ocean' (written and correctly pronounced *el océano*).

### Notes

- (i) Written and pronounced *chofer* (i.e. [chofér]) in most countries of Latin America, including Mexico.
- (ii) *El dinamo* in some Latin-American countries, including Argentina and Cuba.
- (iii) Similarly *componte* 'compose yourself', *detente* 'stop'.
- (iv) Stressed *el frijol* in Latin America.
- (v) *El futbol* is heard in some Latin-American countries.
- (vi) Likewise all words ending in *-mancia* that have the meaning 'divination'.

### 39.2.5 Accent on interrogative forms

In the case of some words, the interrogative form carries an accent. This indicates a fact of pronunciation: the interrogative form is stressed, as can be seen by contrasting the *ques* in *dice que qué pasa* 'he's asking what's happening' or the *cuandos* in *cuando llega* 'when he arrives . . . ' and *¿cuándo llega?* 'when is he arriving?' These words are:

*cómo* how  
*cuál* which  
*cuándo* when  
*cuánto* how much

*dónde* where  
*qué* what/which (also *por qué* 'why')  
*quién* who

See Chapter 24 for further details.

### 39.2.6 Accent used to distinguish homonyms

In the case of some two dozen common words, the written accent merely eliminates ambiguities:

	without accent	with accent
<i>de/dé</i>	of	present subjunctive of <i>dar</i>
<i>el/él</i>	the (definite Article)	he/it
<i>éste/este</i>	see 6.3	
<i>ése/ese</i>	see 6.3	
<i>aquél/aquel</i>	see 6.3	
<i>mas/más</i>	but (rare)	more
<i>mi/mí</i>	my	me (after prepositions)
<i>se/sé</i>	reflexive pronoun	(i) I know, (ii) <i>tú</i> imperative of <i>ser</i>