



Definitive Guide:

How to Choose Dialects for the Spanish-Speaking Market

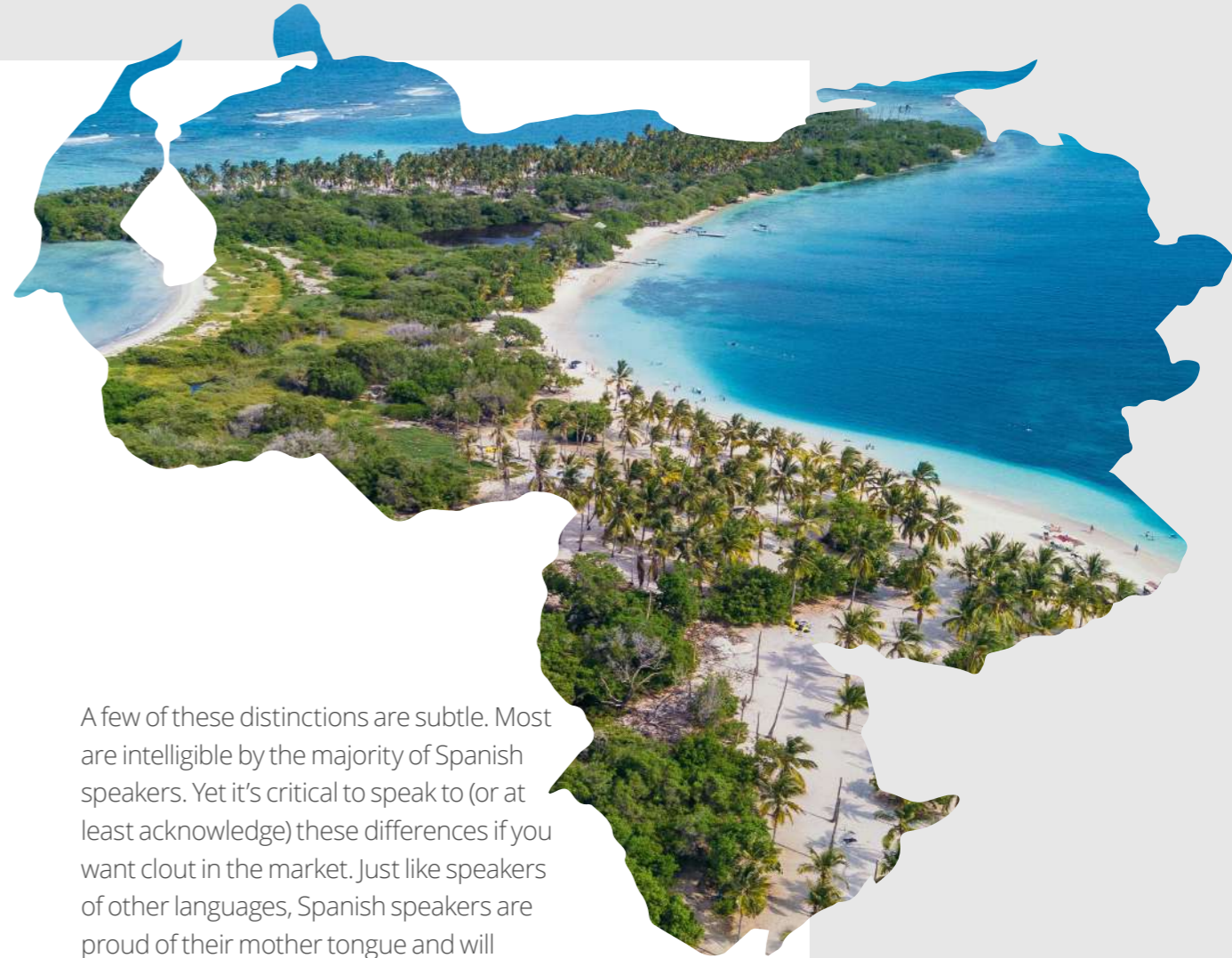
The Spanish-speaking world represents one of the most prolific opportunities to grow the market for your product or service.

With 480 million native speakers and a thriving online population of more than 330 million, Spanish is the world's second most common language after Chinese and far surpasses English. No wonder this economic powerhouse is one of the first that global companies tend to target for localization.

But the fact that Spanish is so widespread poses a not-so-obvious challenge when it comes to marketing to its speakers. What many marketers don't realize is just how nuanced Spanish can be. Within the 31 countries that speak Spanish to some degree, the 21 nations that list it as their official language speak **21 distinct dialects**.

A few of these distinctions are subtle. Most are intelligible by the majority of Spanish speakers. Yet it's critical to speak to (or at least acknowledge) these differences if you want clout in the market. Just like speakers of other languages, Spanish speakers are proud of their mother tongue and will take exception to content that—best-case scenario—fails to observe its nuances, and worst case, creates legal conflict.

Which brings us to the next challenge: limited budget. You can't reasonably localize for all 21 dialects, of course. Once our clients come to that realization, the next question we get is: Which dialect(s) should we prioritize?



And more questions often spring forth from there:

What do you do about Spanish spoken in the US, considering that immigrants come from a variety of Spanish-speaking countries?

Is there really that much difference between variants? Or is there a version of Spanish that's "good" for all Spanish speakers?

How granular should you get in choosing among dialects and localizing for their variations?

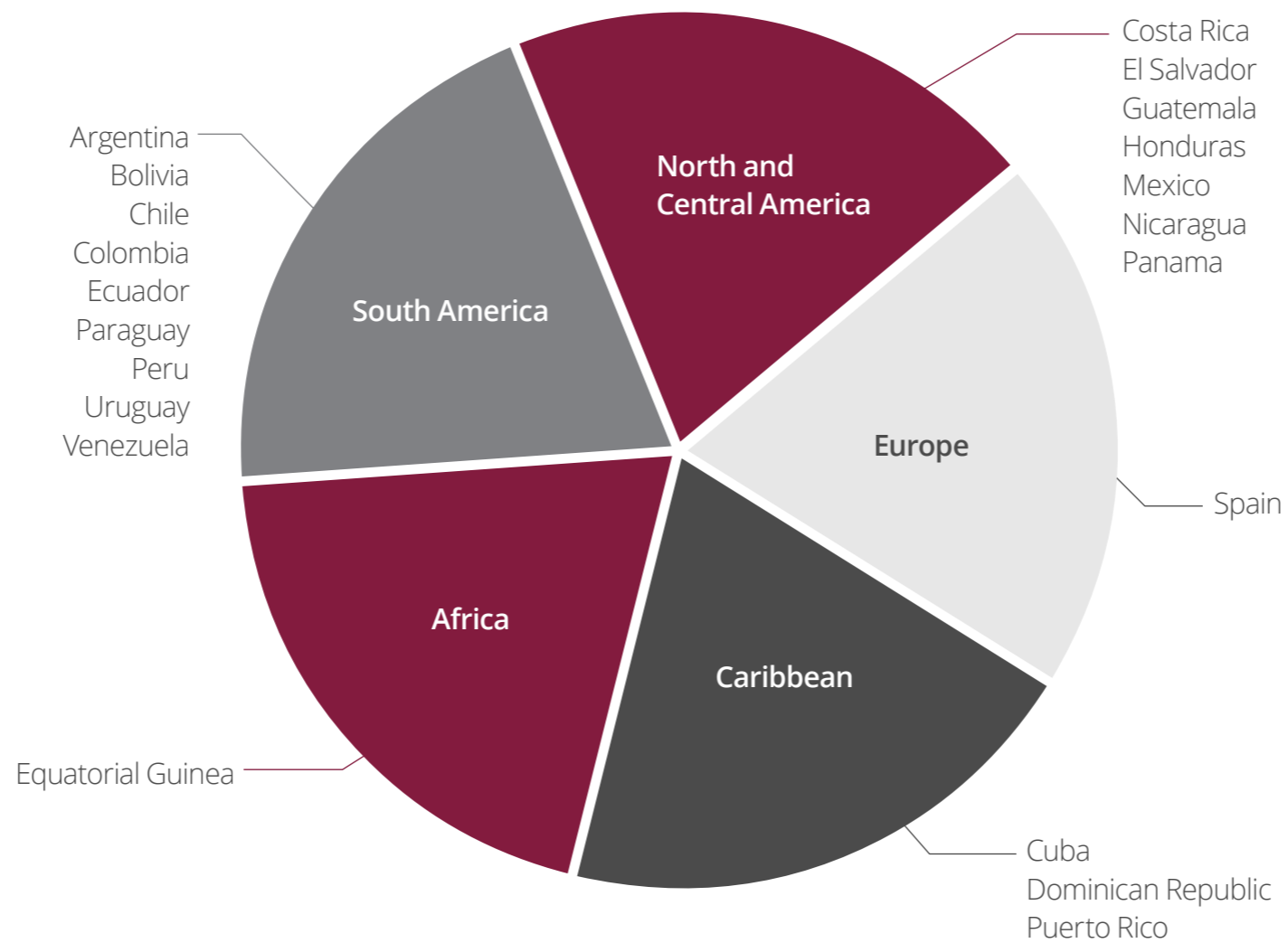
In this ebook, we answer each of these questions and more. Whether you want to target a specific country or the Spanish-speaking world at large, think of this as your go-to guide to the variations and options available to you. It's complex, but we'll boil it down.

Ready? Let's start with a holistic view of this exciting (and growing) market.



The Omnipresent Spanish Market

As we mentioned, Spanish is the official language of 21 sovereign nations and dependent territories.



Straightforward enough, you might say. But here's where things get complicated. There is a distinct version of Spanish to match each locale and the cultures and preferences within it.

And what if we add the US?

It's not on the official list, but it should be. According to a 2015 report (the latest available) by the Spanish non-profit language organization Instituto Cervantes, the United States is home to the highest concentration of Spanish speakers after Mexico and **is expected to become the largest by 2050**. That same year, Forbes put **the purchasing power of US Hispanics at \$1.5 trillion**, and the market has grown annually since.

Take care not to confuse Hispanics and Latinos. "Hispanic" refers exclusively to Americans who ethnically identify with Spanish-speaking countries (almost two-thirds from Mexico alone), while "Latino" includes Brazilians and excludes Spaniards.

But Hispanics are by no means a homogenous group, either. These speakers come from any of the regions listed above. In other words, Spanish-speaking America speaks 21 "national" varieties of Spanish.

No matter where these consumers come from, companies need to make sure their offerings not only jibe but resonate with the target markets. This requires an understanding of the dialects they identify with.



Are Spanish Variants Really That Different?

Yes, they're different. The greatest variations in the language occur in the ways words are pronounced. But for now, let's focus on written content and the differences in vocabulary and grammar:

Vocabulary

The differences in written language are mainly lexical; i.e., the terminology varies. In addition, some Spanish words have developed distinct meanings in different regional dialects. One word, several meanings depending on your location.

Grammar

Grammar, syntax and punctuation vary a lot less, if at all. Among grammatical features, the most prominent variation among dialects is in the use of second-person pronouns. Others include variations in verb tenses for past events.

So how did these lexical and grammatical variations evolve?

Geography plays a major role. Take the word "computer," for example. Close to the US, most Latin American countries tend to "Spanish-ize" English terms, rendering "computer" as *computadora*. In Spain, native speakers would say "ordenador" from the French "ordinateur." Immigration patterns, political events and ancestral influence also play a part. The good news is, in an effort to simplify and capture the widest possible range of the market, we can lump it even more broadly into four regional varieties: **Latin American Spanish, Mexican Spanish, US Spanish and Iberian (Spain) Spanish.**

These are the four categories most companies focus on, so they are the four we'll explore next.



Latin American Spanish

Spoken by: 418 million

Consists of: All Americas south of the US (South America, Mexico, Central America, Caribbean)

Influenced by: Indigenous languages, Iberian Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian

Of all those who speak Spanish around the world, more than 90% live in the Americas, a unique melting pot of cultures. Each nation and community has its own dialect, of course. Even so, we separate Latin America from other markets because its linguistic and cultural differences are less pronounced than in Spain, the US and Mexico (which we're distinguishing from the rest of Latin America as you'll see below).

In fact, as the variant most Spanish speakers can understand, Latin American Spanish is often referred to as "neutral" Spanish. It's also the most likely to borrow words from English, either by adapting the spelling to traditional norms or by using terms exactly as-is (known as calque translation). An example of the latter is "email," which Latin Americans prefer over the literal translation used in Spain: correo electrónico.

What is neutral Spanish?

Ideally, we could address each Latin American community's own dialect. But budget constraints often dictate the use of what's known as "standard," "international" or "neutral" Spanish: a convention that doesn't technically exist, but rather refers to an artificial construct of terms understood by and inoffensive to the majority of Spanish speakers. Remember all those variants for "computer?" To avoid controversy, neutral Spanish simply uses "PC" or "equipo." But these kinds of terms sound awkward in everyday speech, which makes neutral Spanish suitable only for commercial use.



Mexican Spanish

Spoken by: 103 million

Consists of: Mexico

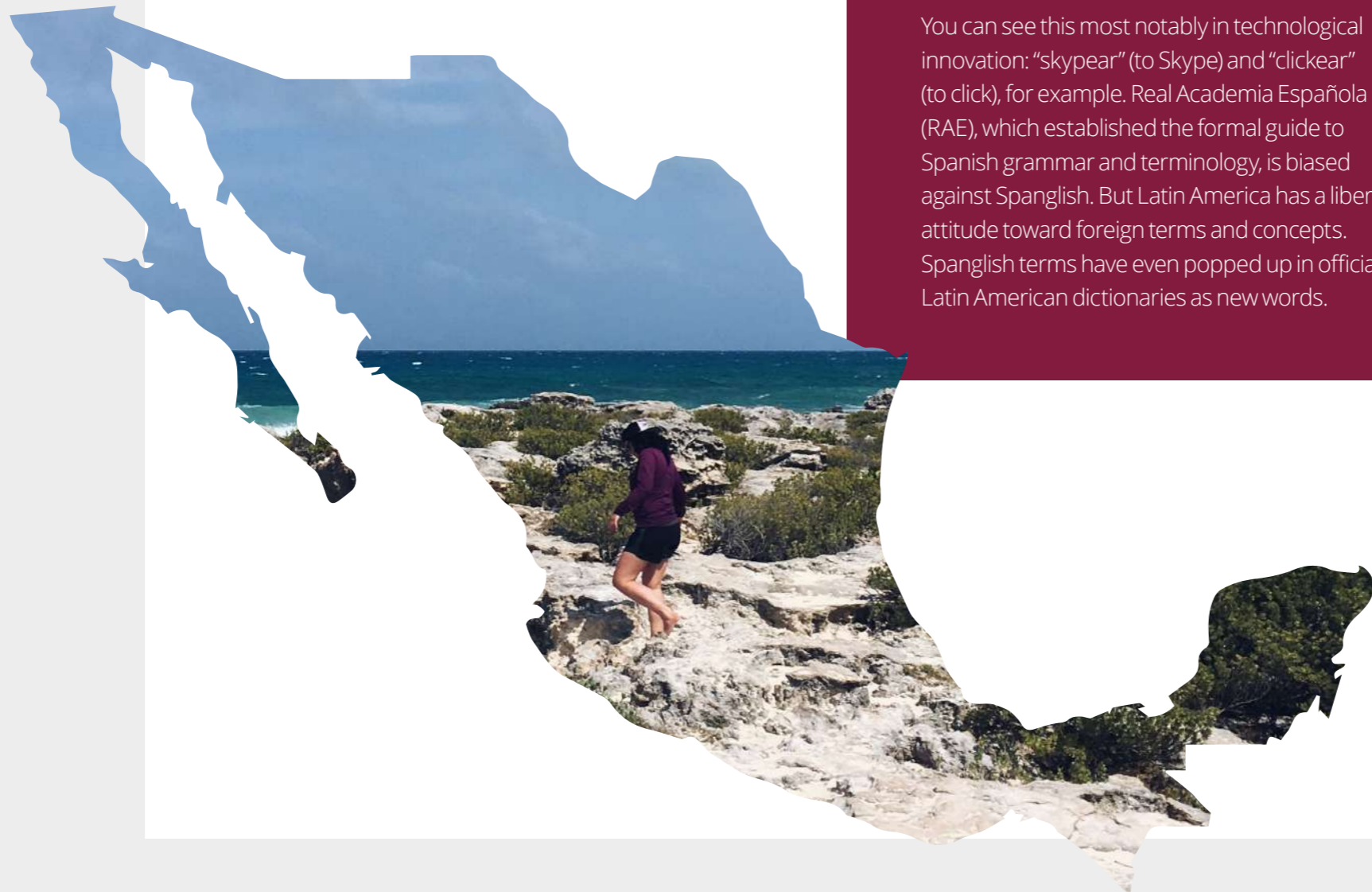
Influenced by: English, the indigenous language Nahuatl

Yes, Mexico is part of Latin America. But Mexican Spanish is unique thanks to heavy influence from Nahuatl, an indigenous American Indian language. This dialect also takes so many loanwords from English—especially near the border—that it's informally known as “Spanglish.”

What is Spanglish?

A complex but fluid combination of Spanish and English, Spanglish is used in many dialects of Spanish. But it's most commonly associated with Mexico, the closest neighbor of English-speaking North America. When English terms express concepts that have no Spanish equivalents—or when the Spanish equivalents are too cumbersome—Spanglish terms are born.

You can see this most notably in technological innovation: “skypear” (to Skype) and “cliquear” (to click), for example. Real Academia Española (RAE), which established the formal guide to Spanish grammar and terminology, is biased against Spanglish. But Latin America has a liberal attitude toward foreign terms and concepts. Spanglish terms have even popped up in official Latin American dictionaries as new words.



US (Hispanic) Spanish

Spoken by: 44 million

Consists of: North America

Influenced by: all Spanish-speaking countries

Like neutral Spanish, US Spanish doesn't exist technically speaking. And it's not, as some people believe, the same as Mexican Spanish. Rather, US Spanish is a term used to describe a mix of word choices from all Spanish-speaking countries. Waves of 19th- and 20th-century migration brought Spanish speakers to the US from all over the world, and they brought their regionalisms with them.

Compounding the complexity of this dialect is an even stronger influence from English, again either calque or modified with Spanish grammatical rules. As you might

expect, Spanish becomes more diluted with English the closer you get to the southern border. North of Mexico City, you'll notice more "code-switching": the subconscious flip-flop between English and Spanish that comes naturally to bilingual Hispanics.

Did you know?

Some say bilingual Hispanics don't mind consuming content in English. So why bother creating culturally driven Spanish campaigns? Not so fast! The truth, studies have shown, is that Hispanics gravitate toward content written in Spanish. One Facebook IQ study showed that Spanish ads significantly increased Hispanics' tendency to buy.



Iberian (Spain) Spanish

Spoken by: 41 million

Consists of: Spain

Influenced by: Arabic, Ibero-Romance languages, Italian, French, indigenous languages like Quechua

Known interchangeably as Castilian Spanish, European Spanish, Peninsular Spanish, Iberian Spanish and simply Spanish for Spain, this dialect is different. The main reason is that while other dialects borrow terms, Spaniards use their own words for everything. Where Latin America would call a computer mouse a “mouse,” Spain translates to “ratón”.

This might be because Iberian is the original Spanish, not the colonial one, and there is pride in keeping it pure. Language evolution is less prevalent in Spain. So, RAE considers Iberian Spanish the most correct, traditional and literary form of Spanish in terms of both vocabulary and grammar.

See Resources at the back of this book for links to RAE guidelines and other useful style guides.



To Sum Up...

The similarities and differences between each regions' grammar and vocabulary are most evident in two ways: first, the formality of tone, represented by the use of **tú**, **usted** and **vos** (different forms of the second-person pronoun for "you" as we mentioned earlier), and second, the influence from other languages.

Here's a quick reference:

	Grammar	Vocabulary
Latin American	Tú: used informally, varies across countries Usted: used formally, common in virtually all the Americas Vos: used informally, varies across countries	Takes influence from English, e.g. email and computadora . Across countries, differences in vocabulary are minor; the biggest differences are in pronunciation.
Mexican	Tú: used informally, common Usted: used both formally and informally Vos: uncommon	Takes influence from Nahuatl vocabulary, e.g. cuate or amigo for "friend"; chamaco or niño for "boy."
US	Use of tú , usted and vos varies by the speaker's origin.	Takes influence from Mexican Spanish, the most widely spoken dialect in the US, as well as from Cuba and Puerto Rico.
Iberian	Uses vosotros as the plural of vos but with its own conjugation, e.g. "you are friends" (which translates to ustedes son amigos using the plural ustedes) becomes vosotros sois amigos .	Takes influence from Europe, e.g. móviles , guay , and ordenador , which in Latin America are celulares , piola and computadora ("cellphone," "cool" and "computer").
Neutral*	Uses the formal usted and informal tú . Since pronouns vary, translators can even rephrase sentences to avoid their use altogether.	Takes from "standard" Spanish—excluding idioms and other regional mannerisms—or invents new words, e.g. emparedado for "sandwich." (But remember, in everyday language, native speakers use their own terms: sándwich , bocadillo , or torta .)

**We're including neutral Spanish as a "dialect" here for comparison.*

So, What Should You Do?

You now know the key differences between the dialects of each region. But the question remains: how do you decide which dialect to target for your Spanish localization project?

There are several important variables to weigh before you get started. These are your:



Target audience

(and their location, behaviors and preferences)



Industry

(that is, whether it uses industry-specific terminology)



Content type and purpose

(technical or creative, to sell or inform)



Budget

(and time)

Armed with enough money and time, you could tailor your content to each and every person or group you want to address. But there are always situations where schedule and budget make it impossible to localize for each country. In which case, you need to assess the cost-benefit of tailoring your content.

Overwhelmed? You're not alone. We'll take you step by step through the recommendations we give our clients, looking at a few example scenarios for technical and creative content.

Which of the following five scenarios do you identify with most?

Technical Content



I'm just getting started and don't have much budget.

If you haven't yet translated any content into Spanish, and most of your new markets are outside of Spain, consider using **neutral (Latin American) Spanish**.

The benefits are practical. It's often too costly for even big companies to produce content in multiple versions of Spanish. If you want to minimize your localization investment while reaching as broad an audience as possible, neutral Spanish is an adequate compromise. Another bonus is that Latin American Spanish translation is typically cheaper than Iberian.

But beware—the more universal and generic a dialect, the less powerful it becomes. Spanish people recognize neutral Spanish for what it is: dry and vaguely alien. That's why we only recommend using neutral Spanish for high-volume, low-risk documentation as there are fewer differences in technical terms. We'll address marketing content later.



I'm already using Latin American Spanish. I want to specialize further.

In that case, look into adapting your content for **Iberian Spanish**. For a fraction of the original price, an experienced linguist can “edit” the material from one dialect to another, using assets like a dialectal glossary and simple tools like search and replace to guide the work. (It's much easier to adapt from generic Latin American Spanish than one for a specific country, so in this case, it makes more sense than starting from scratch.)

Note that if you choose to localize only into Iberian Spanish for all audiences, nothing would confuse or sound offensive to Latin Americans. However, Iberian Spanish does sound awkward to other Spanish speakers with its use of “old-school” (or as some would argue, obsolete) terms.



I have budget and want to reach specific audiences.

Say you want to target Spanish for Colombia. You'll want to partner with linguists who are fluent in Colombian Spanish and can **localize at the country level**. Note, however, that while most language service providers (LSPs) translate into multiple Spanish dialects, they usually offer only dialects from the countries with the strongest ROI—Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Spain and Uruguay—as well as neutral, Latin American and US Spanish.

Of course, since you can't target all 21 markets, we don't recommend country-level localization unless it focuses on one or two markets—your biggest ones. These should be either high-ROI regions or regions in which most of your audience lives. A little market research, as we'll discuss shortly, will determine which approach is most lucrative.



I have budget and want to reach the broadest audience possible.

If you have the budget for two varieties, you'll want **Iberian** and **Latin American Spanish** to reach the vast majority of Spanish speakers. What about for three varieties? **Add the US**. Combined, these three markets command more than \$5 trillion in purchasing power, so they not only represent the most people and regions, but also the most potential ROI.

Again, only use this catch-all strategy on low-risk content.

TIP: Translators must choose neutral terms carefully from a wide variety of dialects. You can make the job easier (and save time and money) by specifying where your target audience is located, which will allow your translator to identify the bare minimum variants to consider. You can use these choices over and over by capturing them in a glossary tool.





Creative Content



I want to translate marketing content, branded content or content that leverages country-specific concepts or current events.

In this case, all bets are off. You have no choice but to localize at the country level—more specifically, to create content in each target language using in-country creative resources (a process known as **transcreation**). No other resource is better equipped to navigate the gamut of cultural nuances—offensive terms, the latest news and slang, how consumers receive a product, etcetera—that affect how messages resonate.

After all, marketing is a culture-based, targeted form of communication; a message that sounds odd won't catch the reader's attention. That's why it's important to create marketing content in the target language. Translating apples-to-apples from English to Spanish is a surefire way to upset bilingual Spanish speakers, to whom low translation quality would be obvious.

But don't worry: your LSP can provide in-country resources with specialized expertise for your projects.

To Sum Up...

Use Latin American Spanish

as a starting point, on a low budget or for high-volume technical content.



Use Mexican Spanish

to target the Mexican market specifically.



Use US Spanish

to target the US market specifically.



Use Iberian Spanish

to target Spain or if you have the budget to expand beyond Latin America.



Localize at the country level

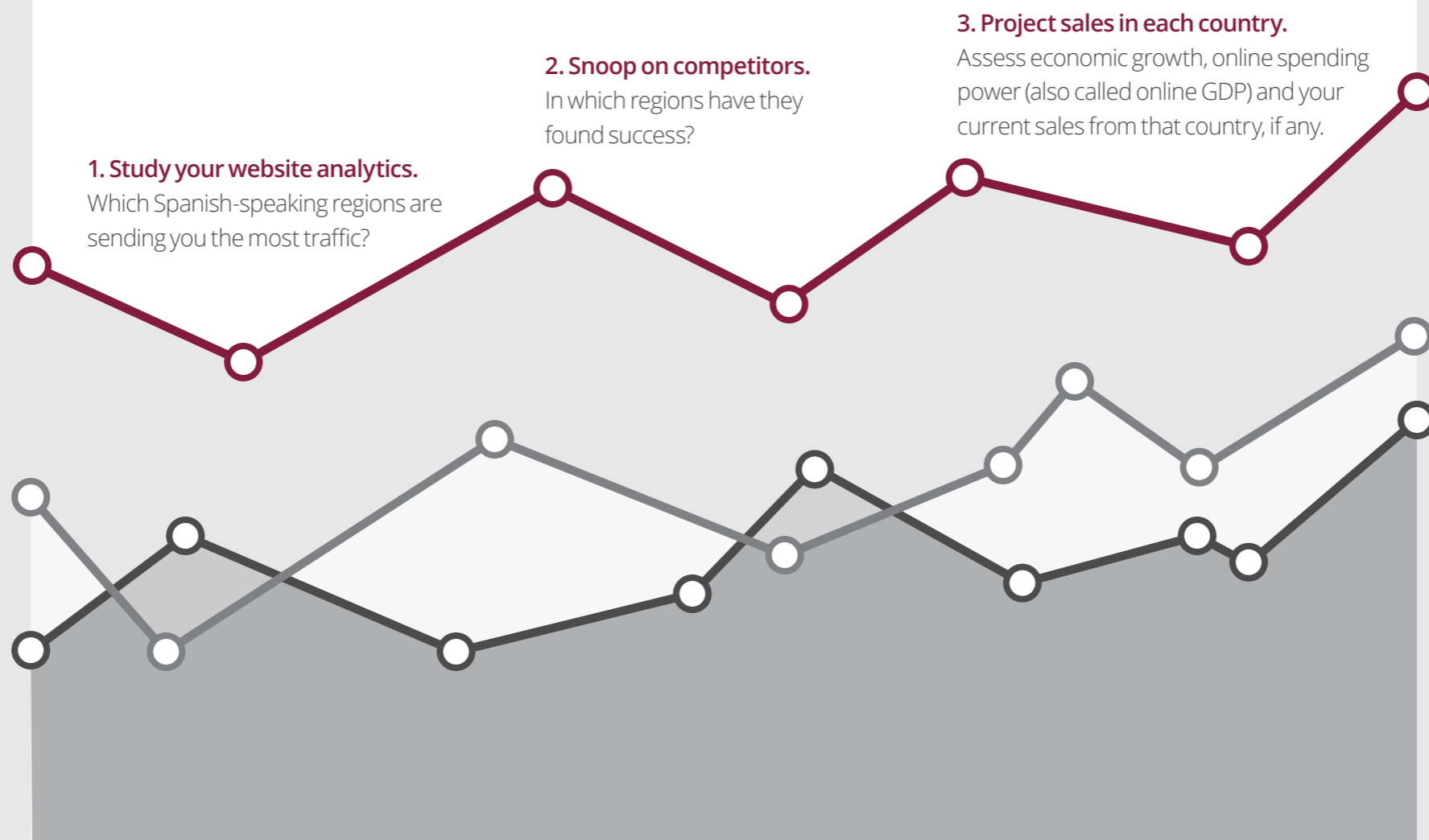
for high-budget, high-risk content like marketing materials.

Now that you have your options, we'll leave you with some homework.

Marketing to the Spanish-Speaking World

By now, you know that Spanish speakers can understand other Spanish variants—at least in written form—but using generic language comes with risks. It's one thing to keep your translation spend to a minimum, but quite another for one-size-fits-all messaging when you're trying to inspire true customer loyalty. Find a balance between language granularity and your budget by choosing your markets wisely.

The most efficient way to do so is with a little strategic planning. You could, for example:

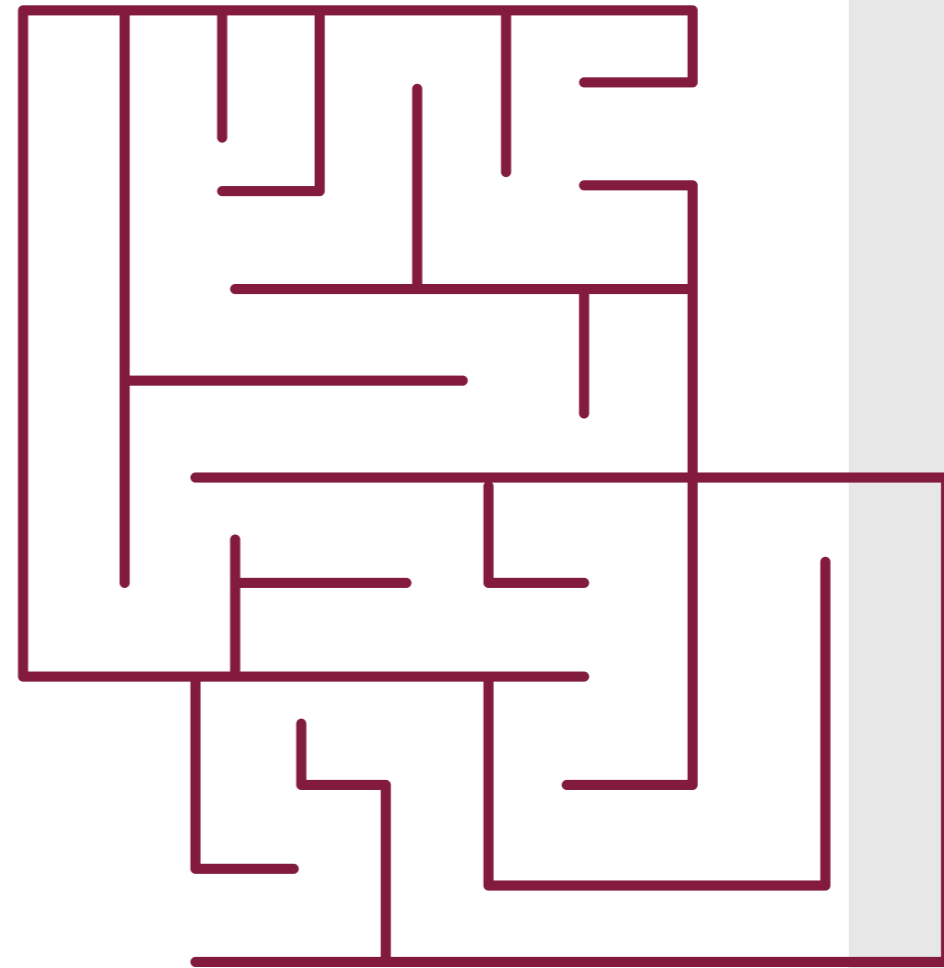


Still unsure where to go from here?

No sweat—that’s what your LSP is for. Try picking their brains about what we’ve talked about throughout this ebook, whether it’s customer behaviors, linguistic variations or the variables to consider for your project. Ultimately, your partner can help you hone in on key markets, then recommend the most cost-effective approach to reach them (targeted or generic) and provide translators that have the experience needed to make sure your message is heard loud and clear.

Our parting piece of advice is this: neutral Spanish might have sufficed before the age of hyper-personalization, but we must step back to question its efficiency as each region continues to grow, diversify and maintain fierce pride of its national and cultural heritage. The closer you are to the culture, the closer you are to your customers. Spanish-speaking participants of a recent Experian survey said it best: we feel “much more loyal to companies that show appreciation of our culture.”

Want more tips on marketing to Spanish consumers? Get in touch—our brains are ripe for picking.



Resources

For more information on Spanish language conventions, see:

Fundéu BBVA, an RAE resource updated regularly to include modern usage: [fundeu.es](https://www.fundeu.es/)

Microsoft Language Portal:
microsoft.com/en-us/language

Apple Developer:
developer.apple.com/internationalization/



We are a leading provider of localization, technology, testing and global digital marketing services for the Spanish-speaking world.

Our clients successfully deliver local relevance in Spanish-speaking markets with high-quality localized products and digital content that meet their customers' language, cultural and user experience needs. Because we are a strategic partner, our clients don't just get exceptional global products and content—they also get advice, insight and added value along the way.

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