

## The economic value of the Spanish language

By : RAFAEL HERNANDEZ COLON

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Three weeks ago, I received an invitation to speak at a seminar to be held in Seville on the economic value of the Spanish language. This took me by surprise because I had never reflected on such a thing as the economic value of Spanish or any other language. But, given the fact the seminar was being conducted under the direction of José Luis García Delgado, a good friend and a distinguished professor of Complutense University in Madrid, and that people of the intellectual caliber of Belisario Betancour, former president of Colombia would be participating, I accepted the challenge. In order to prepare myself, there was homework to do and friends to consult. I must say it was a fascinating intellectual exercise.

Spanish is spoken by some 400 million people throughout the world. It is ranked as the third-most-spoken language, after Mandarin Chinese, spoken by one billion, and English, which is spoken by 450 million people. It is the official language of 21 countries. Unesco estimates that by 2050, one-fourth of the population of the U.S. will speak Spanish. Actually Spanish is the mother tongue of 14% of the U.S. population, some 42.7 million people, just about the population of Spain. A total of 100 million people in the world speak Spanish as a second language. In the U.S. and Canada, Spanish is the foreign language most studied. Thus, Spanish is a linguistic platform for the development of global forces such as migratory movements, foreign direct investments and business activity. Witness migratory flows from Mexico to the U.S., or between Latin America and Spain. Also, consider Spanish investments and enterprises in Puerto Rico or Latin America.

Attending the seminar in Seville brought back many memories. My wife Nelsa and I, and the rest of the participants, stayed at Hotel Alfonso XIII, where I had stayed many times before. The architectural style of the hotel is Spanish revival, of which we have a good example in Puerto Rico at Casa de España. The hotel was built in 1928 and has an inner courtyard surrounded by a columned veranda. I had sat there on many occasions, and had borrowed an idea from the courtyard for the courtyard in Ballajá, the largest building built by Spain in Puerto Rico at the entrance to El Morro. Both courtyards are open so the sun beats hard down on them during the day. But at Alfonso XIII, they have *toldos* (awnings) that roll out over wires connecting the rooftops, which provide shade. The *toldos* are rolled out in the morning and rolled back at night thus providing a very comfortable space both day and night.

I had Joe García, a good friend and architect from San Juan, over to Seville to study the mechanisms for operating the *toldos* to install them at Ballajá. But this was in 1992, the year I left office, so I could not follow through and the *toldos* were never installed in Ballajá. As I engaged in small talk with other participants in the seminar, while sitting in the wicker chairs of the veranda, memories of the *toldos* and many other memories of Alfonso XIII came back to me.

The seminar opened in Seville's 18th century *Ayuntamiento* (City Hall) where I had been received by the mayor on the day that Puerto Rico was honored at the Universal Exposition in Seville in 1992, celebrating the fifth anniversary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus. This was the first time in our history we had participated in a universal exposition. The activities honoring Puerto Rico both at the grounds of the Expo as well as in Seville, were conducted with great dignity by the Spanish government, and the Expo and municipal authorities.

All these memories came back to me as I sat in the ornate great hall of the *Ayuntamiento*. The matter at hand on this occasion was more prosaic. For two days, we discussed the economic value of the language with a multidisciplinary group that included economists, sociologists, linguists, businesspeople and former heads of state from Latin America. Matters such as the Spanish of migrant populations, teaching Spanish as an industry, the cultural and leisure industries (publishing, audiovisuals, tourism), together with services to companies, information technologies and communications such as Internet were included. The bottom line was that when we look at what is happening through globalization and migration, both in Latin America and in the U.S., Spanish is clearly appreciating in value with the multiple interchanges of globalization.

One area of concern, however, is the Internet. The presence of the Spanish language on the Internet is not proportionate to its presence throughout the world. A search through Google is illustrative of this disadvantaged position. If you search for "Spain" through Google, you will find 886 million pages relating to it. If you search for "España," you will find it appears in 322 million pages. Or search for "science" and you will find 4,350 million pages, while *ciencia* will yield only 81.1 million. Clearly this disadvantaged position within the Internet is a challenge facing the Spanish-speaking world.

Nelsa and I enjoyed our days in Seville. On the last day, we went to the Cartuja, the area where the Exposition of 1992 had taken place. The temporary pavilions of the different countries are long gone. But permanent pavilions such as Puerto Rico's are still standing and in use; ours by the Spanish Postal System.

As I stood in reverie before our pavilion, still standing in splendor, I again felt the pride I and the thousands of Puerto Ricans who went to Seville in 1992 felt in contemplating its majestic presence that housed the expositions of our industrial and technological capabilities and the stature of our great painters such as Campeche, Oller and Rodón. I relived the profound emotions evoked at the Pavilions theater by the wide-screen omnivision film on our natural beauties and exquisite cultural expressions. And, in the background of my reverie, I heard the gaiety of the crowd that gathered every afternoon to refresh themselves in our fountain, to enjoy our salsa orchestras or our delicious *piononos* and *arroz con gandules*.

The 21 million visitors who attended the Exposition from all over the world went away from our pavilion with an image of Puerto Rico that we can all be proud of. Those were the days I thought, as I headed back to the island where the battle of the budget was being played out.