

SPEED UP YOUR SPANISH

STRATEGIES TO AVOID COMMON ERRORS

JAVIER MUÑOZ-BASOLS, MARIANNE DAVID
AND OLGA NÚÑEZ PIÑEIRO



Speed Up Your Spanish

‘Excellent book. The chapters put together and systematise a lot of material that is often taught in an anecdotal or haphazard sort of way, if at all. Students will learn a great deal from the book and have their confidence in using Spanish considerably boosted as a result.’

Jonathan Thacker, *Merton College, University of Oxford, UK*

‘An invaluable, highly original and methodically sound approach to correcting and eliminating common, yet difficult-to-eliminate errors.’

Manuel Delgado, *Bucknell University, USA*

‘The user-friendly format and page layout makes *Speed Up Your Spanish* a highly practical reference source for students and teachers.’

M^a Victoria García Serrano, *University of Pennsylvania, USA*

Speed Up Your Spanish is a unique and innovative resource that identifies and explains the common errors which cause confusion for students of Spanish.

From false friends to idiomatic expressions, each of the nine chapters focuses on a grammatical category where English speakers typically make mistakes. Full explanations are provided throughout with clear, comprehensive examples enabling students to learn from their mistakes and gain an in-depth understanding of Spanish grammar and usage.

Key features:

- carefully selected topics and examples based on the most common errors
- exercises throughout to reinforce learning
- shortcuts and mnemonic devices providing vital learning strategies
- a companion website available at www.speedupyourspanish.com providing supplementary exercises as well as audio files

Suitable both for classroom use or self-study, *Speed Up Your Spanish* is the ideal resource for all intermediate learners of Spanish wishing to refine their language skills.

Javier Muñoz-Basols is an Instructor in Spanish at the University of Oxford.

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A mis padres, Miguel Muñoz Osta y Carmen Basols Tena, por enseñarme a ser persistente en la vida

Javier Muñoz-Basols

To my son Walter

Marianne David

To my son Benjamin Alexander and my husband Andrew

Olga Núñez Piñeiro

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Introduction

This book focuses on common errors frequently made by English-speaking students who have attained an intermediate level of Spanish. Once identified, classified and explained, these errors can be tackled and eliminated to enhance spoken and written fluency in the language.

Learning a foreign language can be likened to a journey through a maze of errors. *Errare* (to err in Latin) is what the student must do in order to learn. Like a knight errant, riding through a dark forest full of wrong turns and dead ends before finally coming out into a clearing, the willing learner confronts error in order to become free of it. There is no learning without making mistakes. Mistakes are a key element on the road to mastery since they lead to correction, understanding, and ultimately self-correction.

Some of the common errors we have identified in this book deal with gender and number, accentuation, spelling and capitalization; others highlight false cognates, idiomatic expressions and non-existent words. These errors all reflect misconceptions about the structure of the Spanish language in contrast to English. To help English-speaking students, we have highlighted similarities and differences between English and Spanish, and set down some simple rules. By following these rules, the student will make better connections and associations, and thus gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of both languages.

In order to assist students in achieving mastery in Spanish, we also offer a variety of mnemonic devices and practical shortcuts for remembering both grammar rules and vocabulary. We hope that they will add enjoyment to the process and encourage the development of personal learning strategies.

To effectively practice and drill the material presented, each chapter contains a variety of exercises as well as an answer key in the appendix. To ensure that students also receive the benefits provided by new technologies and interactive learning, the book is accompanied by audio files and supplementary exercises

made available on the *Speed Up Your Spanish* companion website, www.speedupyourspanish.com.

Chapter 1 deals with the number and gender of nouns, stressing the importance of gender in Spanish in contrast to English. It indicates numerous exceptions and suggests strategies for remembering the gender of words that tend to cause problems for English speakers. The purpose of this chapter is to show how correct usage of gender will enable the student to make the proper agreement among the different elements of a sentence, thus leading to improved accuracy both in writing and speaking. This chapter also teaches how to distinguish between words that look similar, but have very different meanings due to their gender, e.g., *el puerto* (port) and *la puerta* (door); *el capital* (money) and *la capital* (capital of a country), etc. Examples of gender affecting meaning are not usually covered by Spanish textbooks, but they are required knowledge for intermediate-level Spanish students.

The next three chapters deal with ‘false friends,’ also known as false cognates. Given the relevance and breadth of this linguistic phenomenon, we have subdivided it into categories and chapters that deal separately with verbs, nouns, and adjectives and adverbs. Our method is to create awareness of the similarity in form between an English and a Spanish word, while demonstrating the difference in meaning. From our experience of teaching English speakers, we know that this is a key area of misunderstanding, and one that has been neglected by traditional grammar texts. Therefore students will find it of particular value.

Chapter 2 highlights false cognate verbs by demonstrating and explaining their different meanings. This is complemented, where appropriate, with useful expressions that help to reinforce the meaning of these verbs.

Chapter 3 presents false cognate nouns and their usage. It complements the explanations with related expressions. In addition to learning which nouns to use, students will benefit from learning related nouns and synonyms, thereby expanding their vocabulary.

Chapter 4 deals with false cognate adjectives and adverbs, and also includes related expressions to help emphasize the meaning of each word. Synonyms are also presented to help broaden students’ vocabulary.

Chapter 5 clarifies the variations and shades of meaning of certain Spanish verbs, as well as other words that appear to be similar yet have different meanings. Some of these verbs are differentiated by their prefixes, e.g., *seguir* - *conseguir* - *perseguir* - *proseguir*.

Chapter 6 contains expressions organized by semantic field, e.g., *caer*, *haber*, *tener*, etc. We stress how important it is for students to master an array of such expressions that cannot be translated literally, but are an essential element of everyday communication.

Chapter 7 covers non-existent words, words with double meanings and other misused expressions that are often a result of linguistic transfer from English. The aim of this chapter is two-fold: to eliminate such non-existent words or expressions from the student's repertoire; and to highlight words with double meanings. Thus by learning correct usage, students can consolidate their knowledge of the language while expanding their vocabulary.

Chapter 8 deals with rules of tonic and written accentuation. This is an important aspect of the language, not often taught in a focused manner, but very relevant to both written and spoken Spanish. Students can practice Spanish accentuation on the companion website and listen to interactive exercises designed for this purpose.

Chapter 9 deals with spelling, punctuation and capitalization. These aspects of the language are not easily mastered, yet are very important in written Spanish. Contrary to popular opinion, Spanish is not a simple phonetic language that is written as it is spoken. This chapter identifies letter combinations that do not exist in Spanish, while highlighting those that are frequently used. Once students become aware of the writing conventions in Spanish (in some cases considerably different from English), they are able to enhance their writing skills. This chapter comes with audio files on the companion website, so that students can listen to audio clips and put into practice what they have learned.

Answers to the exercises contained in each chapter can be found in the Appendix.

It is our conviction, as authors of *Speed Up Your Spanish*, that we are providing students with a rich and invaluable repertoire of words and expressions that will facilitate, if not ensure, a mastery of Spanish. Our hope is that by focusing on the content of each chapter and doing the exercises, students will feel empowered not only to tackle their own common errors and the difficult aspects of the language, but to immerse themselves in the rich and diverse Hispanic culture.

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Website

The book is accompanied by audio files and supplementary exercises for all the chapters through the *Speed Up Your Spanish* companion website, www.speedupyourspanish.com

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1

Gender and number

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The aim of this chapter is to teach the correct usage of gender and number so that you can make the proper agreements among the different elements of a sentence. Numerous exceptions are shown, as well as strategies for remembering the gender and number of words that tend to cause problems for English speakers.

Gender

Spanish articles and adjectives agree in gender with the nouns they modify. All nouns, whether animate or inanimate, have gender. While it is logical that humans and animals should be either feminine or masculine, with objects gender is purely an inherent grammatical feature.

Gender of inanimate nouns

- 1 Most nouns ending in **-o** are masculine and most nouns ending in **-a** are feminine:

el cielo, el carro, el suelo
la casa, la silla, la mesa

There are some irregular nouns that end in **-o** and are feminine:

la dinamo, la foto (or la **fotografía**), la libido, la mano, la moto (or la **motocicleta**), la radio (used as a feminine noun in Spain and most of Latin America; however, *el radio* is also used in some Latin American countries)

Likewise there are also many irregular nouns that end in **-a** and are masculine:



The list below shows the frequency of the irregularity according to the ending (**-ama**, **-ema**, **-ima**, **-oma**, **-uma**). Note that many of these irregular masculine nouns are of Greek origin and also exist in English. While a lot of them are part of medical jargon, many are also of everyday use.

-ama / -ma

el caligrama (calligram), el crucigrama (crossword puzzle), el diagrama (diagram), el drama (drama), el electrocardiograma (electrocardiogram), el epigrama (epigram), el fotograma (in cinema: still or shot), el holograma (hologram), el melodrama (melodrama), el monograma (monogram), el panorama (panorama), el pentagrama (music stave), el pijama (pajamas; also feminine in some Latin American countries), el programa (program), el telegrama (telegram), el carisma (charisma), el cisma (schism), el diafragma (diaphragm), el dogma (dogma), el enigma (enigma), el fantasma (ghost), el karma (karma), el magma (magma), el sintagma (sintagma), el sofisma (sophism), el zeugma (zeugma)

-ema

el dilema (dilemma), el edema (edema), el eccema (eczema), el emblema (emblem), el esquema (diagram, outline), el estema (stem), el fonema (phoneme), el lema (motto, slogan), el morfema (morpheme), el poema

(poem), el problema (problem), el sistema (system), el tema (topic, theme), el teorema (theorem)

–ima

el clima (climate) (and very few more)

–oma

el aroma (aroma), el axioma (axiom), el coma (coma), el cromosoma (chromosome), el diploma (diploma), el genoma (genome), el idioma (language), el melanoma (melanoma), el mioma (myoma), el síntoma (symptom)

–uma

el puma (puma), el reuma (rheumatism), el trauma (trauma) (and very few more)



However, in spite of the examples above, there are just as many words that end in **–ma** and are feminine, even though some of them have the same etymology as in English. These words essentially follow the basic rule that words ending in **–a** are feminine:

la alarma (alarm), la broma (prank), la calma (calm), la cama (bed), la cima (summit), la crema (cream), la diadema (hairband), la esgrima (fencing), la espuma (foam), la estratagema (stratagem), la firma (signature), la flema (phlegm), la gama (range), la gema (gem), la goma (rubber), la lágrima (tear), la lima (lime fruit; file or rasp), la norma (rule), la palma (palm), la paloma (dove, pigeon), la rama (branch), la rima (rhyme), la víctima (victim), etc.



There are also other masculine words that end in **–a**. Some of these nouns may also be feminine when they refer to a woman. In those cases the noun is invariable for both genders:

el/la azteca (male Aztec/female Aztec), el/la albacea (executor of a will), el/la alienígena (alien), el/la camarada (comrade), el cava (Spanish sparkling wine), el chachachá (cha-cha dance), el cometa (comet), el/la dálmata (Dalmatian), el delta (mouth of a river), el día (day), el druida (druid), el/la inca (Inca), el insecticida (insecticide), el koala (koala bear), el Málaga (a type of wine), el mapa (map), el/la maya (Mayan), el planeta (planet), el/la poeta (poet) (also: la poetisa), el quechua (Quechua language), el telesilla (chair lift), el tequila (tequila), el tranvía (streetcar), el SIDA (AIDS), el sofá (sofa), el tanga (thong), el vodka (vodka; also feminine in some Latin American countries), el yoga (yoga), etc.

2 Interestingly, in some cases, the use of **–a** vs. **–o** signifies a difference in **size or shape** as in:

el barco (boat)/la barca (dinghy), el bolso (handbag)/la bolsa (bag), el cesto (large basket, laundry basket)/la cesta (basket), el cuchillo (knife)/la cuchilla (razor blade), el charco (puddle)/la charca (pond), el huerto (vegetable garden, orchard)/la huerta (a large orchard), el jarro (pitcher)/la jarra (jug, tankard, beer glass), el saco (sack)/la saca (a large bag made of coarse fabric), etc.



In other cases it serves to distinguish **a tree** (masc.) from **its fruit** (fem.):

el almendro (almond tree)/la almendra (almond), el avellano (hazel tree)/la avellana (hazelnut), el castaño (chestnut tree)/la castaña (chestnut), el cerezo (cherry tree)/la cereza (cherry), el ciruelo (plum tree)/la ciruela (plum), el manzano (apple tree)/la manzana (apple), el naranjo (orange tree)/la naranja (orange), el olivo (olive tree)/la oliva (olive), etc.

3 Nouns ending in **–aje**, **–or**, **–án**, **–ambre** or a **stressed vowel** are **masculine**:

el equipaje (luggage), el paisaje (landscape), el amor (love), el tambor (drum), el mazapán (marzipan), el refrán (proverb), el enjambre (swarm), el calambre (electric shock; cramp) (but not el hambre, las hambres; see later in the chapter), el colibrí (hummingbird), el champú (shampoo), etc.

4 Also **masculine** are:

- **Mountains, rivers, lakes, seas and oceans:** los Pirineos, el Everest, el Ebro, el Amazonas, el Mediterráneo, el Atlántico, etc.
- **Numbers:** el uno, el dos, el tres, etc.
- **Colors:** el blanco, el negro, el rojo, el amarillo, el azul, el marrón, el gris, el violeta, etc.
- **Days of the week:** el lunes, el martes, el miércoles, el jueves, etc.
- **Sports teams:** el Madrid, el Barça, el Real Zaragoza, los Lakers, etc.
- **Wines:** el rioja, el albariño, el Málaga, el borgoña, etc.

5 By contrast the following categories are **feminine**:

- **Islands:** las (islas) Canarias, las Baleares, las Antillas, etc.
- **Roads:** la (carretera) N-342, la A-91, etc.
- **Letters of the alphabet:** la (letra) “a”, la “b”, la “ñ”, la “z”, etc.

6 Nouns ending in **-cia, -ción, -dad, -eza, -ie, -itis, -nza, -sión, -sis*, -tad, -tud, -umbre** are **feminine**:

la paciencia (patience), la celebración (celebration), la ciudad (town, city), la cabeza (head), la serie (series), la gastritis (gastritis), la bonanza (prosperity), la decisión (decision), la hipótesis (hypothesis), la dificultad (difficulty), la actitud (attitude), la costumbre (custom, habit), etc.

*Except: el análisis, el énfasis, el éxtasis and el paréntesis.

7 A few nouns have **ambiguous** gender, the only difference being one of style, usage or register:

el mar/la mar (more poetic), el maratón/la maratón, el azúcar moreno/la azúcar blanquilla

Sometimes this ambiguity lies in the use of the noun in question in singular or in plural:

el arte (art)/las artes (the arts)

8 Some nouns have a different meaning depending on whether they are used in their masculine or feminine form:

el puerto (port) / la puerta (door)



For these words, see the sections within this chapter: “Similar Word – Different Gender – Different Meaning” and “Same Word – Different Gender – Different Meaning”

Gender of animate nouns

Many nouns that refer to human beings or animals take different endings to indicate gender or sex.

1 To form the **feminine** of nouns ending in **-o, -e** or **-Ø** (a consonant), change **o** ⇒ **a** or **e** ⇒ **a**, or add an **a** to the final consonant.

Masculine

-o, -e or **-Ø**

niño (boy)

gato (cat)

jefe (boss)

señor (Mr.)

Feminine

-a

niña (girl)

gata (she-cat, puss)

jefa (female boss)

señora (Mrs.)

2 Other possible **feminine** endings for animate nouns are: **–esa, –isa, –ina, –triz**:

Masculine

abad (abbot)
 alcalde (mayor)
 barón (baron)
 conde (count)
 diablo (devil)
 duque (duke)
 príncipe (prince)
 tigre (tiger)
 vampiro (vampire)
 poeta (poet)
 sacerdote (priest)
 gallo (rooster)
 rey (king)
 héroe (hero)
 actor (actor)
 emperador (emperor)

Feminine

–esa, –isa, –ina, –triz

abadesa (abbess)
 alcaldesa (mayoress)
 baronesa (baroness)
 condesa (countess)
 diablesa (or diabla) (a she-devil)
 duquesa (duchess)
 princesa (princess)
 tigresa (tigress)
 vampiresa (vamp)
 poetisa (or poeta) (female poet)
 sacerdotisa (priestess)
 gallina (hen)
 reina (queen)
 heroína (heroine)
 actriz (actress)
 emperatriz (empress)

3 Other times gender is indicated with a **different word**:

varón/hembra (male/female), padre/madre (father/mother), yerno/nuera
 (son-in-law/daughter-in-law), toro/vaca (bull/cow), caballo/yegua
 (horse/mare), etc.

4 But there is another category of animate nouns that **stay the same**, while only the article change. These may end in:

- **–a**: el/la atleta, el/la colega, el/la burócrata, etc.
- **the suffix –ista**: el/la artista, el/la budista, el/la comunista, el/la periodista, el/la pesimista, el/la pianista, el/la protagonista, el/la socialista, el/la terrorista, el/la turista, (*exception: el modisto/la modista), etc.
- **–e**: el/la amante, el/la cantante, el/la conserje, el/la estudiante, el/la representante, etc.
- **–o**: el/la soprano, el/la testigo, etc.
- **a consonant**: el/la joven, el/la mártir, etc.



Note that a number of nouns in this category also have a commonly used standard feminine form:

abogado/abogada, ingeniero/ingeniera, médico/médica, ministro/ministra

- 5 Certain animals are **inherently masculine or feminine** irrespective of sex:
la rata, la serpiente, la ballena, el lince, la pantera, el caracol, la hormiga, la liebre, el mosquito, el ruiseñor
- 6 Other unisex words use a feminine article, but are used for either gender:
la pareja, la persona, la víctima, la criatura
- 7 In general, nouns that end in **-e** (whether animate or inanimate) can be masculine or feminine (see the mnemonic device at the end of this section).
el padre, el traje, el bebé/la madre, la leche, la carne
- 8 Nouns that end in **-i** (whether animate or inanimate) are normally masculine:
el alhelí, el colibrí, el rubí, el zahorí
- 9 Nouns that end in **-u** (whether animate or inanimate) can be either masculine or feminine:
el menú, la tribu
- 10 Nouns that end in a consonant can be either masculine or feminine, although as already mentioned above, some of them can be identified because of their ending:
el almacén, la flor, la razón, el mes, el baúl, la mujer



Mnemonic Device

Designing your own strategy for associating nouns with their gender can help you to remember them, like in the following example:

¿Por qué la palabra 'la leche' es femenina en español? Porque **la** leche viene de **la** vaca.

(Why is milk a feminine word in Spanish? Because cows give milk)

Similarly, this learning strategy can be expanded into an entire scenario. For instance, you may create a short paragraph to remember the gender of the following problematic nouns:

la leche – la sangre – la parte – la sal – la carne – la llave – la calle – la piel

La vaca es un animal que da **leche**. También **la carne** es **una parte** de la vaca que comemos y que tiene **sangre**, pero que cuando cocinamos le ponemos **sal**. **La piel** de vaca también es útil para fabricar ropa y zapatos. En la India las vacas están en **la calle** porque son animales sagrados, pero en otros países están en un establo bajo **llave**.

(A cow gives milk. Also, meat is the part of the cow that we eat and it has blood; as we cook it we add salt. The cow's skin is also useful for making clothes and shoes. In India cows are on the street because they are sacred, but in other countries they are locked in a stable with a key.)

Other important aspects related to the gender of nouns



Feminine nouns that begin with a stressed **a** or **ha** take the masculine form of the definite and indefinite article (**el** or **un**) in the singular:

| | | | |
|-------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| el/un agua | las/unas aguas | el/un aula | las/unas aulas |
| el/un águila but | las/unas águilas | el/un hambre but | las/unas hambres |
| el/un hada | las/unas hadas | el/un hacha | las/unas hachas |



The same is applicable when these nouns are combined with adjectives:

| | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| el/un área libre | las/unas áreas libres |
| el/un águila blanca | las/unas águilas blancas |
| el/un arca llena | las/unas arcas llenas |
| el/un arpa sonora | las/unas arpas sonoras |
| el/un aula limpia but | las/unas aulas limpias |
| el/un agua fría | las/unas aguas frías |
| el/un ala rota | las/unas alas rotas |
| el/un arma pesada | las/unas armas pesadas |
| el/un hacha afilada | las/unas hachas afiladas |
| el/un hada madrina | las/unas hadas madrinas |

However, these nouns will take the singular feminine article if an adjective comes between the article and the noun: la **fría** agua.



Note that the above-mentioned rule is applicable only to definite or indefinite articles, and not to other parts of speech such as demonstrative adjectives (esta, esa, aquella, etc.):

✓ esta agua está más fresca que **esa** ✗ not *este agua

esa arma/esas armas, aquella aula/aquellas aulas, toda hacha/todas las hachas



Exercises

EXERCISE 1. Choose the correct gender for the following words.

- 1 ¿Me puedes ayudar a resolver (este/esta) problema de matemáticas? No entiendo (el/la) teorema.
- 2 Hay (un/una) serie en (el/la) televisión que explica (el/la) actitud de (los/las) ballenas ante el peligro.
- 3 (El/La) café que vendían en (el/la) cafetería desprendía (un/una) aroma inconfundible.
- 4 Será mejor que no pongas (el/la) mano allí, o igual (el/la) televisor te da (un/una) calambre.
- 5 Vimos cómo (un/una) águila cayó en (el/la) agua mientras luchaba con (un/una) serpiente.
- 6 (El/la) investigador encontró (un/una) rubí, pero fue incapaz de resolver (el/la) enigma.
- 7 (Este/esta) axioma no concuerda con (el/la) tesis principal (del/de la) esquema.
- 8 Pudieron llegar hasta (el/la) cima (del/de la) Aneto porque (el/la) clima se lo permitió.
- 9 (El/La) rima de (este/esta) poema no tiene (los mismos/las mismas) fonemas que (ése /ésa).
- 10 Me parece que (el/la) clase no es en (este/esta) aula sino en (aquél/aquella).
- 11 No te comas (ese/esa) chocolate. Ya sé que es (un/una) tentación, pero si lo haces te va a producir (un/una) gastritis crónica.
- 12 Llevaba (un/una) tanga rosa debajo (del/de la) bañador que se le transparentaba a simple vista.

EXERCISE 2. The following nouns take either a feminine article or a masculine one. But some take both a feminine and a masculine article. Write the article or articles that fit each noun.

- | | |
|---------------------|------------------|
| 1 (el/la) dentista | 10 _____ rima |
| 2 _____ suelo | 11 _____ mano |
| 3 _____ aguafiestas | 12 _____ mártir |
| 4 _____ motocicleta | 13 _____ carisma |
| 5 _____ barril | 14 _____ guía |
| 6 _____ agua limpia | 15 _____ paisaje |
| 7 _____ dilema | 16 _____ tigre |
| 8 _____ estudiante | 17 _____ naranjo |
| 9 _____ dogma | 18 _____ barca |

10 Speed Up Your Spanish

- 19 _____ hada madrina
- 20 _____ problema
- 21 _____ testigo
- 22 _____ víctima
- 23 _____ Mediterráneo
- 24 _____ colega
- 25 _____ poeta
- 26 _____ do
- 27 _____ actitud
- 28 _____ amante
- 29 _____ martes

- 30 _____ muchedumbre
- 31 _____ serpiente
- 32 _____ delta
- 33 _____ tranvía
- 34 _____ yegua
- 35 _____ socialista
- 36 _____ serie
- 37 _____ ordenanza
- 38 _____ miércoles
- 39 _____ área
- 40 _____ análisis

EXERCISE 3. In each of the following examples, either the masculine or the feminine form of a word is given. Complete the exercise by giving the other form of each noun.

| Masculine | Feminine |
|----------------|----------------|
| 1 el gallo | _____ |
| 2 _____ | la abadesa |
| 3 el león | _____ |
| 4 _____ | la poetisa |
| 5 el toro | _____ |
| 6 _____ | la princesa |
| 7 el emperador | _____ |
| 8 _____ | la yegua |
| 9 el héroe | _____ |
| 10 _____ | la nuera |
| 11 el taxista | _____ |
| 12 _____ | la madrastra |
| 13 el joven | _____ |
| 14 _____ | la modista |
| 15 el conserje | _____ |
| 16 _____ | la ballena |
| 17 el vampiro | _____ |
| 18 _____ | la serpiente |
| 19 el soprano | _____ |
| 20 _____ | la baronesa |
| 21 el zar | _____ |
| 22 _____ | la institutriz |

EXERCISE 4. Choose the word whose gender is different from the rest.

- 1 púrpura/lunes/cabeza/rojo
- 2 carro/barro/hermano/mano
- 3 cura/profesora/abogada/actriz

- 4 sistema/planeta/cama/problema
- 5 sabor/oleaje/parte/calambre
- 6 llave/carne/leche/café
- 7 diadema/cima/puma/lima
- 8 transparencia/rubí/libertad/colitis
- 9 día/salida/mapa/insecticida
- 10 análisis/crisis/síntesis/simbiosis
- 11 agua/aroma/hada/arma
- 12 clima/idioma/víctima/fantasma

Similar word – different gender – different meaning

The following words have different meanings depending on their gender. Many of them are related semantically, e.g., *el cuchillo* (knife) vs. *la cuchilla* (razor blade), which helps in remembering them. In these cases the difference in size of the two objects can be a helpful strategy to remember their respective meanings. But other words are not at all related even though they share the same root, e.g., *el barro* (mud) vs. *la barra* (bar).



Mnemonic device

Think of the phrase: **No es lo mismo el pimienta que la pimienta.** It will help you remember the existence of these similar words with different meanings.

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| el acto | act (action); act (in a play); in plural: cultural events (<i>actos culturales</i>); on the spot (<i>en el acto</i>) |
| el acta (las actas) | minutes; proceedings (of a conference); affidavit (<i>el acta notarial</i>) |

La obra se pone interesante en el tercer acto. ¿Puedo leer el acta de la reunión?

(The play becomes interesting in the third act. Can I read the minutes of the meeting?)

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| el americano | American male; a type of coffee (prepared by adding espresso to hot water) |
| la americana | American female; a suit jacket (in Spain) |

El americano y la americana se encontraron en Madrid. Él llevaba una elegante americana.

(The American man and woman met in Madrid. He was wearing an elegant jacket)

el apuesto good-looking man

la apuesta a bet or wager

Me gusta ese hombre apuesto. Te hago una apuesta a que salgo con él este sábado.

(I like that handsome man. I'll make you a bet that I'll be going out with him this Saturday)

el banco a bench; a bank; a school of fish

la banca banking (activity); the banking institution; bank (in a game of chance)

Han puesto bancos nuevos en el parque. La banca atraviesa un mal momento.

(They have put new benches in the park. The banking profession is not doing well)

el bando a faction; side; edict

la banda musical band; gang; sash; cushion (in billiards)

Romeo era del bando de los Montesco. Llevaba una banda azul en el brazo.

(Romeo was from the Montague faction. He wore a blue sash on his arm)

el barco boat; ship; sailing ship (*barco de vela*)

la barca dinghy, small boat; rowing boat (*barca de remos*)

La barca chocó con el barco pero no hubo heridos.

(The dinghy crashed into the ship but there were no casualties)

el barro mud, clay

la barra a bar; café bar; baguette (*una barra de pan*); lipstick (*una barra de labios*)

Había mucho barro en las calles después de la tormenta. Te esperaré en la barra del café.

(There was a lot of mud on the streets after the storm. I will wait for you at the café bar)

el bolero a Spanish dance and musical rhythm; a lady's short jacket; a bootblack (Mexico) (*un limpiabotas*, in Spain)

la bolera a bowling alley

Esta noche tocan el "Bolero" de Ravel en la bolera.

(They are playing Ravel's "Bolero" at the bowling alley tonight)

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| el bolso | a handbag (for a woman); or travelling bag |
| la bolsa | a bag (plastic, paper); the stock market; a pocket (in Central America and Mexico) |

Cuando miró dentro de la bolsa, se dio cuenta de que no tenía su bolso.
(When she looked inside the bag, she realized she didn't have her handbag with her)

| | |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| el conducto | pipe; channel; duct (anatomy) |
| la conducta | behavior; conduct |

Tienen que operarle el conducto lacrimal. La conducta de tu primo es inaceptable.
(He needs an operation on his tear duct. Your cousin's behavior is unacceptable)

| | |
|------------------|---|
| el cuadro | square (also <i>un cuadrado</i>); painting (also <i>una pintura</i>); a scene; control panel (<i>cuadro de mandos</i>), fuse box (<i>cuadro de fusibles</i>); symptoms (<i>cuadro clínico</i>). |
| la cuadra | a street block (Latin America) (<i>la manzana</i> , in Spain); a stable (for horses) |

Ese cuadro es de Picasso. Tenemos que caminar dos cuadras más.
(That's a painting by Picasso. We have to walk two more blocks)

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| el cubierto | a piece of cutlery; place setting at a table |
| la cubierta | a cover; the cover of a tire, carcass; the deck of a ship, promenade deck |

Pongamos los cubiertos en la mesa. El marinero subió a la cubierta del barco.
(Let's set the table with the cutlery. The sailor went up on deck)

| | |
|----------------|--|
| el cubo | a bucket; a cube (geometry); a hub (of a wheel); garbage can (<i>el cubo de la basura</i>) |
| la cuba | a barrel; a cask |

Tenemos que comprar un cubo nuevo para la basura. Pepe estaba borracho como una cuba.
(We have to buy a new garbage can. Pepe was completely drunk)

| | |
|--------------------|---------------|
| el cuchillo | a knife |
| la cuchilla | a razor blade |

¿Tienes un cuchillo para cortar la cuerda? No, pero tengo una cuchilla para que te afeites.
(Do you have a knife to cut the string? No, but I have a razor blade so that you can shave)

| | |
|------------------|---|
| el cuento | a tale, a fairy tale (<i>el cuento de hadas</i>); story, lie, a tall story (<i>un cuento chino</i>) |
| la cuenta | a bank account; a calculation; restaurant check, bill (<i>¡la cuenta, por favor!</i>) |

Cuéntame un lindo cuento. Tenemos que pagar la cuenta del restaurante.
(Tell me a nice story. We have to pay the restaurant check)

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| el derecho | the law; a right |
| la derecha | the opposite of left (<i>la izquierda</i>); right-wing in politics; right-hand side |

Tenemos el derecho de ser felices. Gira a la derecha en el semáforo.
(We have the right to be happy. Turn right at the lights)

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| el fallo | a mistake; a fault, an error or defect (Spain); a verdict |
| la falla | a geological fault; a fault, error or defect (Latin America) |

No sabía que para decir ‘mistake’ en España se dice ‘el fallo’ y en Latinoamérica ‘la falla’.
(I didn’t know that to say ‘mistake’ in Spain one says ‘el fallo’ and in Latin America ‘la falla’)

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| el fondo | the bottom; the back of a room; the background (of an image); a fund (finance); catalog or collection of a library |
| la fonda | an inn; a boarding house; a refreshment stand (Chile) |

El fondo del lago es profundo. Pasemos la noche en esta fonda.
(The bottom of the lake is deep. Let’s spend the night at this inn)

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| el fruto | fruit (result); profit or benefit; dried fruit and nuts (<i>los frutos secos</i>) |
| la fruta | fruit; seasonal fruit (<i>fruta del tiempo</i>) |

Esta novela es el fruto de mi trabajo. El melocotón es una fruta riquísima.
(This novel is the result of my labor. The peach is a delicious fruit)

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| el gorro | a tight-fitting cap; to be fed up with (<i>estar hasta el gorro de</i>) |
| la gorra | a cap (with peak) |

Necesito un gorro de lana para este invierno. Me regalaron una gorra de los Lakers.
(I need to buy a wool hat for this winter. I received a Lakers cap for my birthday)

el labio lip (of a mouth)

la labia smooth talk; to have the gift of the gab (*tener mucha labia*)

No despegó los labios en toda la comida. Tiene mucha labia, le encanta hablar.

(He didn't utter a single word during lunch. She's got the gift of the gab. She loves to talk)

el leño a log (of wood); a blockhead (person)

la leña firewood

Duerme siempre como un leño. Necesitamos leña para el picnic.

(He always sleeps like a log. We need firewood for the picnic)

el libro a book

la libra a pound; a pound sterling (*libra esterlina*)

Este libro me pareció interesantísimo. ¿Cuánto cuesta una libra de cerezas?

(This book was very interesting. How much is a pound of cherries?)

el lomo a pork loin; the spine of a book; back of an animal

la loma a little hill or hillock

El lomo de cerdo estaba rico. Vamos a subir la loma para ver la ciudad.

(The pork loin was delicious. Let's go up the hill to see the city)

el llanto crying, sobbing

la llanta the rim of a wheel; a tire (in Latin America) (*el neumático* in Spain)

En el castillo se podía oír un llanto por la noche. Tenemos que cambiar la llanta antes del viaje.

(Inside the castle, one could hear someone crying at night. We have to change the tire before the trip)

el madero a piece of wood; a log; a piece of lumber, timber; a cop (in Spain, informal)

la madera wood

Necesito ese madero para el fuego. Cortan árboles para obtener madera.

(I need that log for the fire. They cut trees to get wood)

el manto a cloak; a geological layer

la manta a blanket; *la frazada* (in Latin America)

Necesito un manto para la obra de teatro. Tengo frío, ¿tienes otra manta?

(I need a cloak for the play. I am cold; do you have another blanket?)