

Hablando de gramática

por Señor Conner

Señor Conner is the author of the popular language series *BREAKING THE SPANISH BARRIER*. Each month he tackles grammatical topics of interest to our readers. You can visit his website www.to-break.com to see the wonderful language materials he has developed.

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

Greetings! Thank you to the many readers who have sent in questions during the past few months. In this issue, I'd like to try to answer a few of them.

Lucy wrote: *“My Spanish Club is enjoying the Think Spanish! magazine very much. We use it in conjunction with other conversational aids. My question is in regard to the use of the “diéresis” in Spanish. Could you do an article on it?”*

That is a great topic! Those two little dots that you sometimes find over the letter “u” → “ü” are called “diéresis” in Spanish. There are some words – not really that many – that contain this very special vowel. You may have noticed that “ü” is ONLY found after the consonant “g.” You also may have noticed that either the vowel “i” or “e” ALWAYS follows it.

To understand the importance of these little dots, you must first think back to some basic pronunciation practices in Spanish. When the consonant “g” is followed by “a,” “o,” or “u,” it sounds like the “g” in the English word “go” (think of the Spanish words “gota,” “gazpacho,” or “gusto.”) However, when “g” is followed by “e” or “i,” it sounds more like an “h” sound, such as in the word “horse” (think of the Spanish words “gente” or “gimnasio.”) This “h” sound, by the way, in some countries may actually sound a little harsh as it starts in the back of the throat!

Sometimes, however, there are words that want to employ the “g” sound of the English word “go,” yet are followed by either “e” or an “i”. How does one keep that particular “g” sound when the following vowels (“e” or “i”) cry out for an “h” sound? Well, think of the spelling of the words “guitarra” and “guerra.” What in the world is the “u” doing in those words? The poor little “u” is silent in both words, something that is very unusual for a Spanish vowel. Its only purpose is to keep that “g” sound like “go,” rather than like the “h” is “house.”

So, what about those little dots? What does it mean when a diéresis appears? Those dots have a rather magical power: they bring the “u” sound back to life! I've always told my students that those little dots are calling out to the speaker, saying: “Please, please pronounce me! Don't forget me! I don't want to stay silent, even though I'm surrounded by a “g” and an “e” or “i”!

Here are some of the more common words that employ this special vowel:

ambigüedad (ambiguity)

antigüedad (antiquity)

averigüé (I found out)

bilingüe (bilingual)

cigüeña (stork)

desagüe (drain, drainpipe)

güera (blonde, mostly in Mexico)

lengüeta (shoe tongue)

lingüística (linguistics)

pingüino (penguin)

vergüenza (shame)

PRACTICE:

Pronounce these words aloud. Afterwards, listen to the same words listed on the audio CD to be sure you have said them all correctly: **pingüino, guerra, bilingüe, gesto, guitarra, argüir, guante, distinguí, gesto, Guernica, piragüismo, guisante, pague, pagué, cigüeña, gol, Galicia**

Another reader, Stephanie, wrote: “*For the Think Spanish! magazine’s grammar section, I suggest doing a section on the differences between “cualquier” and “cualquiera.”*”

That is another great topic. Students of the Spanish language often have a very hard time with this one. And for good reason! Here’s how I would explain it.

“*Cualquier*” and “*Cualquiera*” can mean “any” or “whichever” or “whatever.” “*Cualquier*” is simply the shortened form of “*cualquiera*”. It is used as an adjective before ALL singular nouns, whether that noun is masculine or feminine. This fact actually is quite shocking, as we logically might think that “*cualquiera*” should precede a feminine noun. But it doesn’t.

Examples:

Cualquier chico → any boy
Cualquier libro → any book

Cualquier chica → any girl
Cualquier puerta → any door

So when do we use “*cualquiera*”? “*Cualquiera*” is often a pronoun (standing for a noun), and it is seen when there is no noun DIRECTLY following it. It is used to refer either to a feminine or masculine noun.

Examples:

¿Qué libro es el mío? -- Ud. puede elegir cualquiera.
Which book is mine? –You can choose anyone.

¿A quién quieres que yo invite a la fiesta? – Bueno, me da igual. Invita a cualquiera.
Whom do you want me to invite to the party? – Well, it doesn’t matter. Invite anyone.

Podemos elegir a cualquiera de los dos candidatos: Ramón or Luis.
We can elect either (whichever) of the two candidates: Ramon or Luis.

Podemos elegir a cualquiera de las dos candidatas: Ramona o Luisa.
We can elect either (whichever) of the two candidates: Ramona or Luisa.

There is another special use of “*cualquiera*.” It can directly follow a noun that refers to a person. In that case, it has a pejorative (negative) connotation.

Examples:

Su tío es un alcalde cualquiera. Your uncle is just a regular mayor – nothing special!
Mi prima no es una mujer cualquiera. My cousin is not just any (old) woman – she is special!

PRACTICE:

Insert “*cualquier*” or “*cualquiera*” in the following sentences:

- 1) _____ chico que llegue tarde tendrá que esperar afuera.
- 2) No voy a salir con un chico _____.
- 3) _____ de tus amigos puede bailar conmigo primero.
- 4) _____ chica que me insulte tendrá que hablar con mi mamá.
- 5) No voy a cantar con un cantante _____.