Hablando de gramática

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"I say" – Some Cool Sayings

(with some even cooler grammar)

Spanish speakers frequently make use of a *refrán* – an old saying, proverb, or time-honored turn-of-phrase to express their thoughts. Sometimes these old gems will describe – in the most perfect way imaginable – a situation, concept or feeling. Their brevity and elegance are often what makes these *refranes* so wonderful.

Many of these sayings are unusually rich in grammar. That's why I like them so much! So, here are ten of my favorite *refranes,* followed by a loose English translation, and then an explanation of the remarkable constructions that make them all possible.

TEN GREAT *REFRANES*

1) A buena hambre, no hay mal pan. **Beggars can't be choosers** *(When you're really hungry, there is no bad food).*
This first *refrán* is really a classic. I've heard it a lot, and it's wonderful to use with one's own children if they turn their nose up at some food served to them. Some of the cool grammar here is the word *"hambre,"* meaning "hunger,". It is actually a feminine word, but one says *"el hambre."* That masculine definite article is used to avoid saying "la hambre," where those two "a's" would fold into each other, making just one sound, which would make the word sound like this: "lambre." Yet, if a word like *"mucho"* or *"bueno"* is to come before "*hambre*," those adjectives would be feminine, and you are all set (*buena hambre … mucha hambre*). Another cool thing to notice is that *"malo"* turns into *"mal"* before any masculine, singular noun. And for you poetry students out there, *"pan"* stands here for food, which is an example of a snappy poetic device called synecdoche, but perhaps I am getting a little carried away mentioning it.

2) Lo bueno, si breve, dos veces bueno. **What's good, if it is brief, is twice as good** *(Brevity is the soul of wit).*
I love this one. Have your students or children tell it to teachers who complain that that they haven't written enough. A Spanish poet named Gracián wrote this gem during the Spanish Golden Age, complaining about works of literature that simply were too windy, long, and boring! The grammar is very nice here. The neuter pronoun *"lo"* combines with an adjective to refer to a general idea. *"Lo bueno"* means "That which is good." Try this construction in your everyday speech: *Lo malo, lo aburrido, lo interesante, lo divino* when you want to talk about "That which is bad" or "The boring thing" or "The interesting part" or "The divine thing," etc.

3) Más vale tarde que nunca. **Better late than never** *(It is worth more late than never).*
This *refrán* is sure used a lot. I train my students to say this one as they enter the classroom when they are arriving late. I always smile and say, *"Tienes razón."* The verb *"valer,"* meaning "to be worth," is used a lot in Spanish. Notice the word order here is different that what we might do in English. We would put the word "more" <u>after</u> the verb "to be worth." The relative pronoun *"que,"* meaning "than," is also a real workhorse in Spanish. It is used all the time!

4) No hay mal que por bien no venga. **Every cloud has a silver living.** *(There is nothing bad that doesn't turn out good).*
The sentiment of this *refrán* is quite beautiful. It expresses an inherent optimism that all things will turn out well. And how could this list of *refranes* possibly be complete without the subjunctive? This *refrán* contains a classic use of subjunctive. The first clause *"No hay mal"* is followed by a relative pronoun *"que*" and then a verb in the subjunctive. Why the subjunctive? Well, the main clause announced that there was literally nothing that was bad that didn't turn out well. The main clause, in some strange way, refers to a subject that doesn't exist! That ghost-like subject (you couldn't take a picture of it!) is the reason the subjunctive mood followed in a second clause. That second verb was depending on a subject that is not real. Therefore, the word *"venga"* is in the subjunctive.

5) Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres. **You can judge a person by the company he (she) keeps** *(Tell me with whom you walk, and I will tell you who you are).*
This handy *refrán* contains a familiar command *"di"* (from the infinitive *"decir")* followed by an indirect object pronoun *"me"* (don't forget to attach all object pronouns to affirmative commands) followed by an interrogative (*quién* – yes, you can have an interrogative in a statement! This is so because there is an implied question). These words are then followed by an irregular future tense verb (*diré* from the infinitive *"decir")* with a few other cool things (another indirect object pronoun *"te"* before the verb this time) another interrogative *(quién)* followed the irregular present tense of *"ser" (eres).* Wow, a lot of good grammar in a little sentence!

6) Poco a poco se va lejos. **Little by little, one goes far.**
In this sentence, we see the use of the impersonal "*se*." When *"se"* is coupled with the third person singular of a verb, the subject could be translated as "one." You can see signs all over using this construction: *Se habla español aquí …. No se puede entrar …* (One speaks Spanish here … One can't enter …).

7) El saber no ocupa lugar. **One can't know too much** *(Knowing doesn't occupy any space).*
The meaning of this one is quite nice. It's almost as if someone comments that one can only learn so much, perhaps because the size of one's brain is limited. This *refrán* scoffs at this notion by arguing that knowledge doesn't take up any space in the brain … there is limitless room. Therefore, keep learning! The grammar here highlights the fact that an infinitive in Spanish, often coupled with a definite article, is the NOUN form. In English, we would use the "-ing" form … i.e., Knowing doesn't take up space. But here we see *"El saber"* is how one would say "knowing." Similarly, one would say *El fumar es malo para la salud* (Smoking is bad for one's health).

8) El tiempo lo cura todo. **Time heals all wounds.**
Here's another *refrán* that is deeply optimistic. When time passes, wounds heal, and one can forget the pain. There are two interesting grammatical features here: 1) When speaking in general about a concept, use a definite article, unlike in English (*el tiempo* here refers to the concept of "time") 2) When the direct object of a verb is the word *"todo,"* put the neuter pronoun *"lo"* right before the conjugated verb (this *"lo"* doesn't translate!).

9) No hay mal que cien años dure. **Nothing (bad) goes on forever** *(There is nothing bad that can last 100 years).*
What's going on here? Another totally optimistic proverb – the idea being that this, too, shall pass. In other words, nothing bad will stick around too long. Do you see what grammar is at work here? Of course! Our friend, the subjunctive. That negative main clause (ghost-like!) is followed by *"que"* and then followed by a verb in the subjunctive *(dure).*

10) La risa es el mejor remedio. **Laughter is the best medicine.**
This final one encourages us to laugh! A nice thought. The definite article *"la"* combines with the word *"risa"* because we are talking about laughter in general. The word *"mejor"* is an irregular comparative (one doesn't say **más bueno* usually, but rather *"mejor"* to mean "better" or in this case "best.")

PRUEBA DE REPASO

In this very fun Prueba de Repaso, I've described different situations. Choose one of the *refranes* above that you might use each in scenario. Try to use each one of the *refranes* once.

a) --Tu novio llega dos horas tarde a la iglesia para la boda. Tú le dices: _____.

b) --¿Por qué te ríes? ¿Por qué estás tan contento? ¡Acabas de perder otro partido de tenis!
--_____.

c) -- La Bolsa (the Stock Market) ha bajado por tres años consecutivos. --_____.

d) –Llevamos caminando muchas horas. Nunca vamos a llegar a Córdoba.
--Tranquilo. _____.

e) --No te conozco bien, ¿puedes decirme quiénes son tus compañeros?
--¿Por qué? --_____.

f) --Ramón, ¿por qué has escrito una composición tan corta?
--Bueno, señor García, _____.

g) --Tuve que ir al hospital anoche porque me rompí la pierna.
--¡Qué lástima! --¡Qué va! En el hospital conocí a un doctor guapísimo y mañana vamos al cine juntos.
Como siempre decía mi abuela:_____.

h) --No voy a seguir estudiando gramática. Me duele la cabeza y no puedo aprender más.
--No es verdad. Mi abuelo siempre decía: _____.

i) --Esta tortilla española está seca y sosa. No me la voy a comer.
--Escúchame, Rafael. _____.

j) --Mi novio está saliendo con otra chica.
--No te preocupes. En unos días todo estará bien de nuevo.
--¿Por qué dices eso? --_____.

* *Answers on page 19*