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# Discovering Spanish through Poetry

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# Discovering Spanish through Poetry

A Senior Honors Project  
In Partial Fulfillment of  
Bachelor of Arts with University Honors  
in Language and World Business-Spanish  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Meghan Shelby Stuthard  
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Faculty Mentor: Dr. Álvaro Ayo  
Modern Foreign Languages-Spanish

As a Spanish student in high school, my teacher informed me, “You know when you are fluent when you begin to dream in Spanish.” Because I began to dream in Spanish many years before I considered myself near fluency, I sought other methods by which to measure my progress, including poetry. I had experimented with writing poetry in Spanish, but I found it extremely difficult. The rhyme schemes of English didn’t seem to translate into other languages. The syllabification of Spanish was not only vastly different from that of English, but it was conditional! With each sentence, the number of syllables in a word could miraculously change. The days of counting how many times one opened the mouth while speaking in order to determine syllables were over. With Spanish, acquiring a rhythm with which to write poetry was nearly impossible for a non-native and amateur speaker like me. That being discovered, I set about writing poetry in Spanish in order to further my knowledge of the language, the nuances of the syllabification, and my ability to find a rhythm in this language that, while perhaps not perfect, could be distinctly my own.

I decided that an appropriate Senior Project for the University Honors Program would be to attempt to write a collection of short poems, including numerous haikus so that I could practice my syllabification and rhythm. I had originally considered a long, narrative poem, but I found it to be more like writing a paper and less like practicing the small nuances of the language.

I drew heavily from my literature classes in order to begin my poetry-writing. I studied textbooks to see how authors had fashioned their poetry. Was this problem with attaining rhythm in poetry a problem that all Spanish-speaking authors and poets encountered? Or was it my inability, as an English-speaker, to understand the innate ability that a native speaker has to create poetry without even thinking?

I used my haikus as a jumping-off point. Haikus have a distinct and seemingly easy formula: 5 syllables in the first line, 7 syllables in the second line, and 5 again in the third and final line. But to write a haiku in Spanish was not easy. Even short Spanish words can have many syllables and, likewise, longer words can have as few as one! To remain within the restraints of the 5-7-5 formula was a difficult task. It took pages and pages of scrap paper and hours of thumbing through a dictionary to find that perfect word that would make a haiku come alive.

In Spanish, syllables are divided up within a word depending heavily on vowels. Additionally, words in a Spanish sentence can run together and link to create fewer syllables. Once again, this is heavily dependent on the vowels in a word and sentence. In Spanish, the weak vowels are the “U” and “I,” and their placement within a word can have a great effect on the syllabification. A word wherein a strong vowel is coupled with a weak vowel is broken into a syllable after these two letters. A Spanish word wants its breaks to fall after a vowel and before a consonant. Similarly, a Spanish sentence wants its breaks to fall after a vowel and before a consonant as well. When words are strung together in a sentence, the end of one word and the beginning of a new one can sometimes coincide and the sentence can drop syllables.

When writing my haikus, if I needed a two-syllable word, I could search my brain for one and come up with the perfect idea; however, the word would end up not working because its first letter would potentially link with the last letter of the prior word,

potentially leaving me with one less syllable than I had hoped for. The haikus were the most difficult poems to write. In addition to their syllables, I wanted them to be simple but graceful, beautiful and with a clear message, and above all, smart. I thought that my Spanish vocabulary was decent, but it was always a challenge to find the perfect and most apropos word to complete a haiku. In the process of writing them, I learned many great words, many of which I could not even use when it came down to it. I labored for hours and hours over the haikus I finally selected for my collection. There were others that I did not feel were as potent.

For my two longer poems, I tried to find a pattern with which to write them. I did not pay as much attention to the syllabification contained within the longer poems; I was more interested in a scheme and an overall “genius.” I wanted them to feel like a long poem that I could write in English. I once again drew inspiration from numerous textbooks of Spanish literature in order to fashion the poems. I found that a lot of Spanish poetry was subtle in its strong message, and I wanted mine to reflect that.

Now that I have finished my project, I hope that I am nearer to the fluency that I crave. I found that poetry has helped me to shy away from the mechanical way of thinking and speaking and that instead, I am speaking more from habit and concentrating less on my mistakes.

**El viejo árbol  
Toca el cielo donde  
Está el gran rey**

El-vie-jo-ar-bol  
To-ca-el-cie-lo-don-de  
E-sta-el-gran-rey

Translation:

The old tree  
Touches the heavens where  
It is the great king

In this haiku, the syllables were difficult to separate because there are three occasions where the vowels would link if not for them both being strong vowels. In any other instance, the vowels would link and combine syllables. Because both the O and the A are strong vowels (“vocales fuertes”), “viejo árbol” is divided as “vie-jo-ar-bol,” wherein normally, the vowels would not be split up. The same thing occurs with “Toca el” and “Está el.”

My inspiration for this poem came while sitting on the banks of the Mississippi River where huge old trees line its banks. In downtown Memphis, it is easy to see and feel the signs of past centuries. It is remarkable to think that these same trees were there on the banks to withstand the floods, provide inspiration for Mark Twain, and see the era of slavery come and go. Yet, no one can appreciate their beauty except those that stop to admire them in wonder.

**Muchos colores  
En el barrio crean un  
Jardín de amor**

Mu-chos-co-lo-res  
E-nel-bar-rio-cre-a-nun  
Jar-din-de-a-mor

Translation:

Many colors  
In the neighborhood create  
A garden of love

In this poem it is easy to see the nuances of the syllabification of Spanish. In the second line especially, the words are barely recognizable from the way there are split. I have learned that a way for a non-native speaker to improve his abilities is to learn to speak syllable by syllable instead of word by word. The sentences are always split by syllables and not words. The ability to speak the language while dividing the syllables in one's head is a great sign of mastering the language.

When I was growing up, I lived in a neighborhood where many races and walks of life were represented. I believe that many children are not affected by color or other differences, but that their intolerance is learned rather than a part of them. As an adult, I always look back on my experiences in childhood as helping me to be tolerant of people's different ideas and ways of life.

**En la tierra yo  
Ando pero las huellas  
Quieren quedarse**

En-la-tier-ra-yo  
An-do-pe-ro-la-s(h)ue-llas  
Quie-ren-que-dar-se

Translation:

Upon the ground  
I walk but the footprints  
Want to remain

The “H” in Spanish is not pronounced and instead the “J” takes the sound of the “H.”  
That is why, in Spanish, the “H” isn’t taken into account when dividing the syllables.

This poem wants to show that wherever one walks, one leaves figurative footprints.  
Sometimes, even when someone doesn’t want the path he’s taken to show, the footprints  
want to stay. It should not be a sign of regret, but should be used so that he can learn from  
his mistakes.

**El río corre  
Y los amantes miran  
El viaje largo**

El-rí-o-cor-re  
Y-lo-sar-man-tes-mi-ran  
El-via-je-lar-go

Translation:

The river courses  
And the lovers watch  
Its long journey

In the first line, “río” has the combination of a weak vowel and a strong vowel. In this case, the “I,” a weak vowel, should stay linked with the “O.” But since it is accented, it stands alone. In the second line, there is a great example of how Spanish syllables want to begin with a consonant and can grab onto the last letter-consonant of the previous word.

I wrote this haiku after perusing my photo album. I have a picture of a close friend and his now-wife sitting on the banks of the river watching the water go by. When I was younger, one of my favorite books featured a line about how the waters of a river are the most active, because they course through so many cities and through so many terrains before finally meeting up with other rivers and running towards the ocean. A river is the most magnificent and powerful body of water, I think, and it is because we as viewers can take part in a long trip to who-knows-where without even leaving a bench on the banks.

**Hay felicidad  
Los años la cambian y  
Hay las lágrimas**

(H)ay-fe-li-ci-dad  
Lo-sa-ños-la-cam-bian-y  
(H)ay-las-la-gri-mas

Translation:

There is happiness  
The years change it and  
There are tears.

Once again, there is the issue of the “H” that isn’t pronounced in the word. “Hay” is typically its own syllable.

This follows my earlier haiku wherein I wrote about the colors of the neighborhood. Time can teach us many things, both good and bad, and sometimes, we learn to be tolerant of things we shouldn’t.

**¿Y si el futuro  
Se puede ver en la flor  
Se miraría?**

Y-siel-fu-tu-ro  
Se-pue-de-ve-ren-la-flor  
Se-mi-ra-rí-a

Translation:

And if the future  
Can be seen in a flower  
Would one look?

In the first line, the “si” and “el” link to form one syllable because the “I” is a weak vowel that combines with the strong vowel “E.” Once again, the weak “I” is accented, so it does not link with the strong “A.”

Sometimes I wish I knew what life had in store for me, but then I realize that there is no way to sit back and just wait for life to happen. I have to get out, accomplish things, and build a future for myself. If I could know the future, would I really want to? And if the future could be seen in something as simple as the petals of a flower, would I really want to destroy the simple pleasure of looking at a flower to see a future that had already been decided for me?

**En el verano  
La temporal de lluvia  
Toca la tierra**

E-nel-ve-ra-no  
La-tem-po-ral-de-llu-via  
To-ca-la-tier-ra

Translation:

In the summer  
The rainstorm  
Touches the earth.

This short poem is just meant to be a simple example of Spanish. The syllabification was easy to do and it just seems to flow when it is spoken aloud.

I wrote this while watching a summer thunderstorm from my porch.

**El tigre ruge  
Mientras el antilope  
Sigue muy quieto**

El-ti-gre-ru-ge  
Mien-tra-se-lan-ti-lo-pe  
Si-gue-muy-quie-to

Translation:

The tiger roars  
While the antelope  
Stays very still

In the second line of the haiku, the word “mientras” lends itself to three different syllables. Spoken alone, the word would only be divided up into two syllables, but in its context it is able to be three. All of the second line flows together and I have discovered that spoken by syllables, it sounds much better than read by words. This is the great mystery of Spanish: how, when spoken, it has a rhythm that is better understood through syllabification than individual words.

I was thinking about the course of nature when I wrote this. Furthermore, I was able to learn some new words from writing it. I didn't know the word for “to roar” nor did I know the word for “antelope.” That one didn't end up being too difficult to remember, though.

**Luces de oro  
Campos de trigo sano  
El amanecer**

Lu-ces-de-o-ro  
Cam-pos-de-tri-go-sa-no  
E-la-ma-ne-cer

Translation:

Golden lights  
Fields of healthy wheat  
The dawn

This one, too, has a great rhythm and almost even rhymes. “Amanecer,” the word for dawn, composes nearly the entire last line and splits perfectly.

I thought of this while driving through Arkansas. Arkansas in many parts is all farmland, and in the early morning light, all of the fields just glow golden in the rays of the sun.

**La noche negra  
Sin estrellas brillantes  
La manta triste**

La-no-che-ne-gra  
Si-ne-stre-llas-bri-llan-tes  
La-man-ta-tris-te

Translation:

The black night  
Without shining stars  
A sad blanket

In this poem, there is an example of double letters. In some cases, like the case of “RR,” each “R” becomes part of a different syllable. The word breaks in between the two. This poem shows how “LL” differs. Each “L” stays connected with the other “L.” This is because the “LL” forms a “yuh” sound and separate, they would create completely different sounds.

While this could be metaphoric as well, I was gazing at a starless sky and thinking how empty it appeared without the stars. I live in the middle of a city, so I hardly ever see the stars anyway, but on the darkest nights the sky feels like a big heavy blanket that has been thrown over the world.

**Las gotas de lluvia parecen saltamontes  
Cuando salpican en la tierra.  
Son los saltamontes transparentes  
Brincando tan rápidos a ningún lado,  
Las hojas amarillas de otoño los persiguen como patos.**

**Los charcos de lluvia parecen espejos del cielo,  
La cara del sol sonríe en la superficie.  
Son los espejos brillantes  
Destellando tan lustrosos en la tarde,  
Las nubes se mueven como un rebaño de ovejas  
Para mirarlas detrás del sol.**

**La nieve me parece una cama de las almohadas y plumón,  
Puedo cubrirme en la colcha de nevada.  
Son las camas blandas,  
En la nieve veo un trozo de tiempo,  
En los trozos de tiempo puedo esconderme,  
Aquí estoy feliz y segura y  
Loca de imaginación,  
Yo espero la lluvia otra vez.**

Translation:

The raindrops are like grasshoppers  
As they splash on the ground.  
They are the transparent grasshoppers  
Hopping so quickly to nowhere,  
The yellow fall leaves chasing after them like ducks.

The rain puddles are like the mirrors of the sky,  
The face of the sun smiles into the surface.  
They are the brilliant mirrors  
Sparkling so brightly in the afternoon,  
The clouds move like a flock of sheep  
To see themselves behind the sun.

The snow is like a bed of pillows and down,  
I can cover myself in a quilt of snowfall.  
They are the soft beds,  
In the snow I can see a piece of time,  
In the pieces of time I can hide myself,  
Here I am happy and safe  
And crazy from imagination,  
I wait for the rain again.

This poem was meant to present things as one can imagine them to be. I used different forms of water to let my imagination run wild. I imagined big, plopping rain drops as grasshoppers, still puddles in the streets as mirrors, and soft snow drifts as down quilts. I tried to attach the stanzas to different seasons as well. The fat raindrops are from fall, splashing down on the yellow leaves. The lazy puddles can be found in the spring, when each day brings a different rain. The snow, of course, is from the winter. At the end of the poem, I wait for the cycle to begin all over again.

**Soy cerebro con información,  
Soy cínica de poca emoción,  
Soy pingüino en los mares árticos,  
Soy paciente en la casa de locos.**

**¡Soy escritora, estudiante y amiga!  
Soy trabajador fuerte como hormiga,  
Soy más que mujer de maquillaje,  
Soy más que hombre de traje.**

**¡Soy todos y más que muchos!  
No soy nadie y todo el mundo,  
Los animales, flores y playas; soy todos,  
Tenemos los todos adentro los cuerpos.**

**Ven conmigo, podemos descubrirnos,  
Más que hija, más que hermana,  
Yo soy palabra,  
¡Yo soy crucigrama!**

Translation:

I am a brain full of information,  
I am a cynic of little emotion,  
I am a penguin in the arctic seas,  
I am a patient in a mental hospital.

I am a writer, student, and friend!  
I am a hard worker just like an ant,  
I am more than a made-up woman,  
I am more than a man in a suit.

I am everything and more than many!  
I am nobody and everyone,  
The animals, flowers, and beaches; I am all of them,  
We have all of them inside of ourselves.

Come with me, we can discover ourselves,  
More than daughter, more than sister,  
I am words,  
I am like a crossword puzzle.

I wrote this poem as a statement of empowerment and the feeling of being whatever I chose to be. It's an "I'm the master of my own destiny" statement. I wanted to say that sometimes I can be smart and sometimes I can be doubtful, that at times I feel like I can survive anything and that sometimes I surrender to my insecurities.

People can surrender to their path in life or they can create their own, which is why I included the lines about women in make-up and men in suits. We all can become more than we think we can and we all have the possibility and option of not living up to our own expectations, as well. It is necessary to take control of yourself and not to think of yourself in terms of limitations and labels, but in terms of accomplishments and goals.