



Attention to Detail

By Eduardo Díaz, director Smithsonian Latino Center
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France Córdoba is President of Purdue University, an astrophysicist, and Chair of Smithsonian Institution's Board of Regents. Recently I had the honor of sitting down to dinner with her and learned that she is the daughter of a Mexican father and Irish mother. I was also fascinated to discover that she had conducted anthropological research in Oaxaca, Mexico. Sitting next to me was Dr. Gilberto Cárdenas, Assistant Provost at the University of Notre Dame, and Chair of the Smithsonian Latino Center Board. During dinner Dr. Córdoba began talking about accents in Spanish, their importance, and the need to pay attention to detail. As she talked, I immediately harkened back to the mid-seventies Chrysler Córdoba commercials, featuring famed Mexican actor Ricardo Montalbán (often mispronounced Móntalban). You know the one where he raved about "soft Corinthian Leather." How I wished that he would have insisted that Chrysler allow him to pronounce the car's name correctly.



So, where is the right place? Normally in Spanish, the accent, not necessarily the accent mark falls on the second-to-the-last syllable. For example: *amigo* (male friend). As with all languages, there are exceptions, like Córdoba, Cárdenas, Montalbán, Ávila, *lástima* (shame), *próximo* (next), *eslabón* (link), and *situación* (situation). The accent marks are there as a guide against mispronunciation. There is more to this grammatical lesson, but I'm not qualified to go further, and this is not Spanish class. So, what's all the fuss? Well, Chrysler may be a North American car brand, but it's our language. It's official—the United States is now the second-largest Spanish speaking country in the world. The present-day states of California, Nevada, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas were once Mexico, where Spanish reined as the official language. The aggregation of Spanish-speakers in this country is surpassed only by Mexico. I'm sure this news has not been well-received by English-only advocates. I could be brash and say something like, "get over it." I'd rather offer, "embrace it." It's a beautiful language and there are probably many people in your community who speak it.

I'm a sports fan and I'm proud to see all the Latino major league baseball players, nearly 30 percent of the total. I'll tell you though, watching a game is painful, because I have to listen to announcers butcher names like Robinson Canó (Cano), Carlos Beltrán (Beltrán), and Ramón Vasquéz (Vásquez). They also do it with Ésteban (Estéban), Chavéz (Chávez), and Peréz (Pérez). A peculiar case is Alex Avila, the second-generation Cuban American catcher for the Detroit Tigers. For some reason he has decided to buck the language and insist on Avíla, versus Ávila. I'm told that his father Al, however, holds to tradition. Go figure. And, please don't get me started on names like Villarreal and the correct pronunciation of the "ll" or "rr" in Spanish; sounds like "y" in the first case, and in the second, you simply roll the "r." I sure wish ESPN and other networks would put its announcers through a basic course in the proper pronunciation of Spanish first and surnames. I mean, they're accurate about runs batted in, strikeouts, etc. Why not be accurate on the names of many of the one-third who play the game? Or, better yet, how about promoting a Latino announcer to primetime English broadcasts? Honestly, against a tradition of inadequate employment diversity at the major sports networks, I'm not hopeful that this will happen anytime soon. I guess I could just go to the *ESPN en Español*, but why should I have to?

I'm sure there are readers who want me to "get over it." Like I said, this may be the United States, but it's our language, and I will continue to spell and pronounce my last name, Díaz (not Diáz), and speak

my language, *como se debe* (as it should be). As Dr. Córdova inferred, there is nothing wrong with a little attention to detail.