

A Comparative Study On The Primary Linguistic Differences Between English And Two Romance Languages (French And Spanish)

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Abstract:

English, French and Spanish are European languages written using more or less the same letters of the alphabet. Even though they seem similar, they are vastly different in terms of linguistics (such as adjective placement, adverb placement, misunderstanding of meanings of words, gendered nouns and adjectives, conjugations, articles and possessive adjectives). Comparing the syntax and semantics of these three languages can help one understand the explicit or nuanced variations in the languages.

Aim: This study aims to bring out the linguistic differences between these different languages.

Objective: The goal of this comparative study is to closely analyse these languages and infer their differences with particular emphasis on the linguistic aspects of these languages.

Date of Submission: 07-03-2025

Date of Acceptance: 17-03-2025

I. Introduction:

In the famous words of Nelson Mandela, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart."

Learning new languages has always been a topic of great interest among people, especially in today's times. With the entire world increasingly becoming one globalized village, the need for understanding foreign languages has become a necessity now more than ever.

French and Spanish are two of the most popular foreign languages that English speakers attempt to learn. Since they consist of more or less the same letters, language learners find it easier to learn these languages than to learn other languages like Korean or Japanese.

Though these languages look the same, a closer analysis will reveal that there are more differences than similarities in these European languages. Those major linguistic differences in the three Western languages are pointed out in this research study.

There are approximately seven primary linguistic differences between English, French and Spanish. It is important to have a good knowledge and interest in these languages (especially the written form of these three languages) to undertake such a comparative study.

1. Adjective Placement

The first prominent difference between English and French or Spanish is the placement of the adjective in the sentence. In English, the adjective always appears before the noun.

For example: *A tall boy or a short girl*

Here, the adjectives (tall or short) are placed before the nouns which are boy and girl respectively.

In French and Spanish, however, the adjective is always placed after the noun. It never appears before the noun. That is the cardinal rule of these languages.

For example: *Un garçon grand ou une fille petite (A tall boy and a short girl) – French*

Un chico alto y una chica baja (A tall boy and a short girl) - Spanish

Here, the adjectives (grand and petite or alto and baja) are placed after the nouns.

It could be initially challenging for an English speaker to distinguish the semantic structures when learning French or Spanish.

French and Spanish speakers could face a similar difficulty when learning the semantic structure of English.

2. Adverb Placement

In English, the adverb is always placed after the object, not before the object. But in French and Spanish, the adverb should be placed in front of the object in a sentence.

For example, in English:

"You write essays well" (subject – verb – object – adverb)

It wouldn't be written as "You write well essays." That would be wrong.

However, in French:

« Tu écris bien des essais » (subject – verb – adverb – object)

The literal translation of this sentence is "You write well essays."

Similarly, in Spanish:

"Escribes bien los ensayos" (subject – verb – adverb – object)

The literal translation of this sentence is "You write well essays" as well.

Sentence Structure:

English: subject – verb – object – adverb

French and Spanish: subject – verb – adverb – object

With the addition of adjectives in the sentences, the sentence structure would be as follows:

English: subject – verb – adjective – object – adverb

French and Spanish: subject – verb – adverb – object – adjective

3. Misunderstanding in Meanings: Faux Amis or Falsos Amigos (False Friends)

Faux Amis or Falsos Amigos means "false friends" in English. They are words that are misleading and make a person think of words similar to those in English, but they are entirely different.

For example: College in French means "High School" in English, not college. The correct word for college is "L'université" in French. College does not mean university in French. They are completely two different levels of education.

In the show *Emily in Paris*, Emily starts dating a "college" student who is her best friend's younger brother (thinking he is a university student because she is an American woman, a native English speaker, who does not know French properly). Later, he reveals to her that he goes to school and is only seventeen years old which creates a lot of misunderstanding and tension among the family members and embarrassment, especially for Emily who is twenty-three or twenty-four years old at the time. She dated a minor because of her lack of knowledge of the semantic differences between these two languages.

There are other common faux amis in French like:

1. "Mouton" means "Sheep" and not "Mutton" (the meat)
2. "Librairie" means "Bookstore" and not "Library"
3. "Actuellement" means "Currently" and not "Actually"
4. "Envie" means "Desire or a Craving for something" and not "Envy" or "Jealousy"
5. "Sensible" means "sensitive" and not "sensible" (Sensible is raisonnable in French).
6. "Passer un examen" means "To take up an exam" and not "Passing an exam"
7. "Rester" means "To stay" and not "To rest"
8. "Attendre" means "To wait" and not "To attend"
9. "Sympathique" means "nice or friendly" and not "Sympathetic" (Sympathetic is compatissant in French).
10. "Bachelier" means "High School graduate" and not "bachelor" (Bachelor or being single is Celibataire in French).

In the show *Kim's Convenience*, a woman jokingly tells Kim and his wife that a waiter in Spain still thinks she is pregnant because she said, "Estoy embarazada" when she wanted to say "I'm embarrassed" in Spanish (It means "I'm pregnant" and not "I'm embarrassed" as a native English speaker might be inclined to think).

There are other common falsos amigos in Spanish like:

1. "Ropa" means "clothing" and not "rope"
2. "Parientes" means "Relatives" and not "Parents"
3. "Exito" means "Success" and not "Exit"
4. "Carpeta" means "Folder" and not "Carpet"
5. "Fabrica" means "Factory" and not "Fabric"
6. "Constipado" means "To have a cold" and not "To be constipated"
7. "Firma" means "Signature" or "Company" and not "Firm"
8. "Educado" means "Polite" and not "Educated"
9. "Campo" means "Countryside" or "Field" and not "Camp"
10. "Compromiso" means "Commitment" and not "Compromise"

Because of how similar the words between the three languages sound, the human brain is wired to make that connection even though it is wrong. That is why these words are interestingly known as “false friends” meaning “they are not who they seem to be.”

4. Gendered Nouns and Adjectives

In English, nouns or adjectives are not explicitly identified by their genders (like the moon, the flower, the chalk or the chair does not have a gender in English). But in French and Spanish, every noun has a gender (male and female) which can be quite confusing for native English speakers.

For example: In French, the moon and the flower are feminine while the sun and the boulder are masculine.

La lune and Le soleil (the moon and the sun)

La fleur and Le rocher (the flower and the boulder)

(*La* is the feminine article for nouns and *Le* is the masculine article for nouns).

Similarly, in Spanish, the chalk and night are feminine while cheese and day are masculine.

La tiza and El queso (Chalk and Cheese)

La noche and El día (Night and Day)

(*La* is the feminine article for nouns and *El* is the masculine article for nouns).

It is important to note that the adjectives in foreign languages like French and Spanish change according to the gender of the associated nouns.

For instance: The noun “boy” is masculine, so the male version of the adjective would be used (*grand* or *petit* and *alto* or *bajo*).

Similarly, the noun “girl” is feminine, so the female version of the adjective would be used to describe the girl (*grande* or *petite* – with the addition of the letter “e” in French) and (*alta* and *baja* – with the letter “o” changing to “a” in Spanish).

Gender plays a huge role in Romance languages like French and Spanish. It is not an overstatement to say that every aspect of languages like French or Spanish revolves around gender. Everything (living or non-living) has a gender in these languages but this is not the case in English.

5. Conjugations

The conjugations in English are quite simple with not many variations between the verbs for the different pronouns. However, in French and Spanish, every pronoun is followed by a verb different from the previous one.

For example, in English (to sleep):

I sleep
You sleep
He or She sleeps
We sleep
They sleep

Here, except for the verb that follows the pronouns he and she, all other verbs do not change. They are the same.

For example, in French (the verb *dormir* – to sleep):

Je dors (I sleep)
Tu dors (You sleep)
Il/Elle dort (He or She sleeps)
Nous dormons (We sleep)
Vous dormez (You sleep)
Ils/Elles dorment (They sleep)

Here, except for the verbs that follow the pronouns “Je (I)” and “Tu (You),” all other verbs change. They are different.

For example, in Spanish (the verb *dormir* – to sleep):

Yo duermo (I sleep)
Tu duermes (You sleep)
El/Ella/Usted duerme (He or She sleeps)
Nosotros/Nosotras dormimos (We sleep)
Vosotros/Vosotras dormís (You sleep)
Ellos/Ellas/Ustedes duermen (They sleep)

Here, all other verbs that follow the pronouns are different from each other.

It is important to note that all verbs in both French and Spanish are classified into three types of regular and irregular verbs and are conjugated accordingly.

In English. To eat, to wait, to choose (no distinct grouping or classification of verbs)

In French, “ER,” “RE” and “IR” verbs (manger, attendre, choisir)

In Spanish, “ER,” “AR” and “IR” verbs (comer, esperar, elegir)

Also, based on respect and formality or informality and plurality, there are different forms of addressing the other person.

In French, “Tu” (informal pronoun) and “Vous” (formal singular and plural pronoun)

In Spanish, “Tu” and “Vosotros/Vosotras” (informal singular and plural pronouns) and

“Usted” or “Ustedes” (formal singular and plural pronouns)

6. Articles

In English, there are just three articles, classified into definite and indefinite articles.

For example:

The Earth

A cat

An apple

(*The* is the definite article and *A/An* are the indefinite articles).

In French and Spanish, the definite and indefinite articles are based on gender. There are also different articles for singular and plural definite and indefinite articles.

French definite and indefinite articles:

Le fromage (the cheese)

La confiture (the jam)

L'hôtel (the hotel)

Les chocolats (the chocolates)

Un stylo (a pen)

Une gomme (an eraser)

Des chocolats (some chocolates)

Le is the masculine definite article.

La is the feminine definite article.

L' is the article used before a vowel.

Les is the plural form of the masculine and feminine definite articles.

Un is the masculine indefinite article.

Une is the feminine indefinite article.

Des is the plural form of the masculine and feminine indefinite articles.

Spanish definite and indefinite articles:

El queso (the cheese)

La mermelada (the jam)

El hotel (the hotel)

Los chocolates (the chocolates)

Las flores (the flowers)

Un stylo (a pen)

Una gomme (an eraser)

Unos chocolats (a few chocolates)

Unas flowers (a few flowers)

El is the masculine definite article.

La is the feminine definite article.

Los is the masculine plural form of the masculine and feminine definite articles.

Las is the feminine plural form of the masculine and feminine definite articles.

Un is the masculine indefinite article.

Una is the feminine indefinite article.

Unos is the masculine plural form of the masculine and feminine indefinite articles.

Unas is the feminine plural form of the masculine and feminine indefinite articles.

7. Possessive Adjectives

In English, possessive adjectives don't differ based on gender.

Some English possessive adjectives:

My cat

Your dog

His car

Her bicycle

But in French and Spanish, it is entirely based on gender.

Some French possessive adjectives:

Mon père (my father)

Ma mère (my mother)

Mes parents (my parents)

Ton frère (your brother)

Ta sœur (your sister)

Tes frère et sœurs (your siblings)

Son grand-père (his or her grandfather)

Sa grand-mère (his or her grandmother)

Ses grands-parents (his or her grandparents)

Notre chat (our cats)

Nos chats (our cats)

Votre chien (your dog)

Vos chiens (your dogs)

Leur voiture (their car)

Leurs voitures (their cars)

Mon is the masculine singular possessive adjective for “My”

Ma is the feminine singular possessive adjective for “My”

Mes is the masculine and feminine plural possessive adjective for “My”

Ton is the masculine singular possessive adjective for “Your”

Ta is the feminine singular possessive adjective for “Your”

Tes is the masculine and feminine plural possessive adjective for “Your”

Son is the masculine singular possessive adjective for “His”

Sa is the feminine singular possessive adjective for “Her”

Ses is the masculine and feminine plural possessive adjective for “His and Her”

Notre is the masculine and feminine singular possessive adjective for “Our”

Nos is the masculine and feminine plural possessive adjective for “Ours”

Votre is the masculine and feminine singular possessive adjective for “Your”

Vos is the masculine and feminine plural possessive adjective for “Yours”

Leur is the masculine and feminine singular possessive adjective for “Their”

Leurs is the masculine and feminine plural possessive adjective for “Theirs”

Some Spanish possessive adjectives:

Mi padre (my father)

Mi madre (my mother)

Mis padres (my parents)

Tu hermano (your brother)

Tu hermana (your sister)

Tus frère et sœurs (your siblings)

Su abuelo (his or her grandfather)

Su abuela (his or her grandmother)

Sus abuelos (his or her grandparents)

Nuestro gato (our male cat)

Nuestra gata (our female cat)

Nuestros gatos (our male cats)

Nuestras gatas (our female cats)

Vuestro perro (your male dog)

Vuestra perra (your female dog)

Vuestros perros (your male dogs)

Vuestras perras (your female dogs)

Su coche (their car)

Sus coches (their cars)

Su bicicleta (their bicycle)

Su bicicletas (their bicycles)

Mi is the masculine and feminine singular possessive adjective for “My”

Mis is the masculine and feminine plural possessive adjective for “My”

Tu is the masculine and feminine singular possessive adjective for “Your”

Tus is the masculine and feminine plural possessive adjective for “Your”

Su is the masculine and feminine singular possessive adjective for “His” and “Her”

Sus is the masculine and feminine plural possessive adjective for “His” and “Hers”

Nuestro is the masculine singular possessive adjective for “Our”

Nuestra is the feminine singular possessive adjective for “Our”

Nuestros is the masculine plural possessive adjective for “Ours”

Nuestras is the feminine plural possessive adjective for “Ours”

Vuestro is the masculine singular possessive adjective for “Your”

Vuestra is the feminine singular possessive adjective for “Your”

Vuestros is the masculine plural possessive adjective for “Yours”

Vuestras is the feminine plural possessive adjective for “Yours”

Su is the masculine and feminine plural possessive adjective for “Their”

Sus is the masculine and feminine plural possessive adjective for “Theirs”

II. Conclusion:

“To have another language is to possess a second soul.” – Charlemagne

“A different language is a different vision of life” – Federico Fellini

“One language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way.” – Frank Smith

It can be definitively concluded from this comparative study that French and Spanish have more linguistic similarities than French and English or Spanish and English.

In terms of word order or sentence structure (i.e. Adjective placement and Adverb placement), misunderstanding in meanings (i.e. faux amis or falsos amigos), gendered nouns and adjectives, conjugations, articles and possessive adjectives, English and the Romance languages like French and Spanish are vastly different from each other though they possess the same letters.

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