Dictionary of Mexicanismos / Slang, Colloquialisms, and Expressions Used in Mexico (Second Edition)

Reviewed by:
Andre Moskowitz

Author:
Dennis McKenna

Publisher:
Adelfa Books
www.adelfabooks.com

Publication date:
2006

ISBN:
978-0-97608001-2-1

Price:
$24.95, plus $5.75 shipping and handling

Available from:
InTrans Book Service
intransbooks.com

Dennis McKenna’s Dictionary of Mexicanismos / Slang, Colloquialisms, and Expressions Used in Mexico (Second Edition) contains a smorgasbord of Mexican slang terms and phrases not found in the Diccionario de la Real Academia Española or other general Spanish-language dictionaries, and this alone will make it useful to those whose professional, social, or cultural activities make knowing the ins and outs of Mexican lingo advantageous or de rigeur. This review’s primary focus, however, will be on the dictionary’s treatment of more mainstream Mexican Spanish terminology.

The dictionary is divided into a Spanish-English section, consisting of about 4,200 entries, followed by a much shorter English-Spanish section with about 1,100 entries. The Spanish-English section translates the Mexican Spanish headwords (terms placed at the beginning of dictionary entries, called lemas in Spanish) with their U.S. English equivalents. The English-Spanish section, which functions as an index, goes in the opposite direction. The headwords of all the entries are in boldface and the text is easy to read.

Defining “Mexicanisms”

A practical and theoretical issue is how to define the term mexicanismo or “Mexicanism,” which is something McKenna appears to do in the first sentence of the dictionary’s preface: “Mexicanismos are words and colloquial expressions that are unique to Mexico” [emphasis on unique added]. Despite this stated premise, a great many terms and expressions defined in McKenna’s dictionary are used in several different Spanish-speaking countries. Some are even used in a majority of the Spanish-speaking countries, often, though not always, with the regional specification “(LatAm).”

A more advantageous inclusion criterion, and one that McKenna may have consciously or unconsciously used in many cases, would be to define a mexicanismo as a term used in less than 50% of the Spanish-speaking countries (i.e., in nine or fewer), with Mexico being one of those countries. This would allow a lexicographer compiling a Mexican Spanish dictionary to include regionalisms used in a minority of Spanish-speaking countries, one of which is Mexico. It would also mean that such a dictionary would include a large number of non-general Spanish terms (i.e., regionally marked linguistic elements) that are unfamiliar to a broad range of non-Mexican Spanish speakers. To put it another way, it would allow those of us who are not Mexicans or are not intimately familiar with Mexican Spanish to have a reference tool that provides us with terms and phrases we need to know in order to communicate effectively with Mexicans. Although this criterion can be difficult to apply since it requires the lexicographer compiling the dictionary to have conducted dialectal research on the Spanish language from a global perspective, it will be the standard used in this review to determine whether or not a term should be included in McKenna’s dictionary.

I examined the larger Spanish-English section and tested it on a more or less random sample of 50 regional terms commonly used in Mexico that begin with the letters a, b, or c. Below are two lists. The first contains Mexican regionalisms that are included in McKenna’s dictionary, and the second contains those that are not.

Mexican Regionalisms Defined in McKenna’s Dictionary of Mexicanismos

acordeón: cheat sheet
**acta de nacimiento:** birth certificate

**afanador:** janitor

**agujeta:** shoelace

*Observation:* There is no entry for *cinta,* which is used in several northern Mexican states for "shoelace."

**alberca:** swimming pool

**albur:** off-color remark or pun involving a double entendre, generally with crude sexual connotations

**alto:** stop sign || red light

*Observation:* The phrase *pasarse un alto* ("to run a stop sign") is also listed.

¡ándale!: go ahead! || keep going! || hurry up! || yeah, sure! || really! || right on! || exactly!

**apagador:** (light) switch

**aventón:** lift, ride in a car || push, shove

*Observation:* *Raite,* used to mean "lift, ride a car," is also an entry.

**banqueta:** sidewalk

**barda:** stone or masonry wall

**betabel:** beet

**bocina:** speaker (e.g., of a stereo) || receiver, handset (of a telephone)

*Observation:* McKenna characterizes *bocina* ("receiver") as *Snd* (Standard) usage (i.e., General Spanish usage), but the existence of *auricular* and *tubo* ("receiver") suggests that *bocina* ("receiver") is regional rather than majority usage.

**bolero:** shoe shine boy

**botana:** snack, appetizer, hors d’oeuvres

*Observation:* The use of *botana* ("person who is the butt of a joke") is also referenced, but the verb *botaneo* ("to eat snacks or appetizers") is missing and should be an entry.

**briago:** drunk

*Observation:* The dictionary lists this term only as an adjective, but *briago* ("drunkard") can also be a noun.

**bueno:** hello (used when answering the telephone)

**buró:** nightstand

**cachucha:** (baseball) cap

**cairel:** corkscrew shaped curl of hair, ringlet

**cajeta:** (Mexican) *dulce de leche*

**caja de los muertos:** trunk of a car

**camellón:** median, center divider, traffic island

**camión:** bus

**carriola:** baby carriage, stroller

**cascarita:** pickup game (e.g., of soccer)

**cerillo:** match (for lighting a fire) || boy who bags groceries (at a supermarket)

*Observation:* The first usage of this entry has the regional specification "(also C.A.)," which implies that *cerillo* ("match") is used in Central America. However, *fósforo* is the preferred term for this item in all Spanish-speaking countries with two notable exceptions: Mexico (*cerillo*) and Spain (*cerilla*).

**chabacano:** apricot || tacky, bad taste, common

*Observation:* The second usage, "tacky, bad taste," is listed in the dictionary as *Snd usage* (i.e., non-regional usage), but the term also appears in the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* without any regional specification. However, this usage appears to be far from universal.

**chamarra:** jacket

**charola:** tray || badge (of a police officer or other official)

**chicharo:** pea

**chino:** curly (referring to hair)

*Observation:* The dictionary does not list *chino* ("curler") or *ponerse chinito* ("to get goose bumps").

**chipote:** bump (on a person’s head)

**chongo:** hair worn in a bun

**ciudad perdida:** shantytown, slum, favela

*Observation:* *Paracaídista* ("squat") is also an entry.

**colonia:** neighborhood, residential area, section of a city

**corcholata:** cap (of a bottle)

¡córrele!: go for it!

*Observation:* ¡Córrele! should be translated as "hurry up!" or "move it!" rather than "go for it!"

**cruda:** hangover
cuate: guy || buddy || twin
cubeta: pail, bucket

Mexican Regionalisms Not Defined in McKenna’s Dictionary of Mexicanismos

Missing from McKenna’s dictionary are the following regionally weighted terms, also beginning with the letters a, b, or c.

*ayuntamiento*: city hall || city council
Observation: In other countries “city hall” is referred to as the alcaldía, intendencia, or municipalidad, while “city council” is called the consejo municipal or corporación municipal. McKenna’s dictionary has an entry for presidencia municipal, another Mexican synonym of “city hall,” and its related term, presidente municipal (“mayor”), although palacio municipal (“city hall”) is missing.

*bastilla*: hem
Observation: This is called a bajo, basta, bota, botamanga, botapié, falso, or ruedo elsewhere, and/or by its General Spanish equivalent, dobladillo. The Mexican term valenciana (“type of hem that is folded outwards, French style”) is also missing.

*broche*: barrette, hair clip
Observation: This is called a bincha/vincha, gancho, hebilla, horquilla, prensapelo, or presilla elsewhere.

*cachondo*: horny
Observation: Equivalents used elsewhere are alborotado, azado, arrecho, bellaco, berrincho, birrondo, cachudo, calentón, caliente, embromado, quesudo, recho, salido, veraneado, or volado. Although our repertoire in English is no doubt not limited to merely “horny” and “randy,” we would probably be hard-pressed to come up with as impressive an array of colloquial regional synonyms. If so, what does that tell us?

*claxon*: horn (of an automobile)
Observation: This is referred to as a bocina, clauso, corneta, fotuto, or pito elsewhere.

*comida*: lunch
Observation: The General Spanish equivalent is almuerzo. Comer (“to have lunch”) is also missing. The dictionary lists almuerzo (“breakfast”), although in many regions of Mexico almuerzo is a late breakfast or mid-morning snack, often eaten in addition to desayuno. McKenna also lists comida corrida (“meal consisting of several items sold at a set price”).

Overall Evaluation

One can argue that the six missing terms listed above are all basic enough to be included in a dictionary that addresses Mexican regional usage. Yet one should not be too critical. Of the 50 Mexican regionalisms assessed here, 44 are entries in McKenna’s dictionary, and almost all of these are translated correctly. This is an impressive proportion by almost any dictionary standard, and one that could be higher if a different sample of Mexican regionalisms were selected, or if we factored in the sub-issues addressed above. Overall, Dennis McKenna’s dictionary is one of the best of its kind. Since it has a large number of Mexican regionalisms that are translated accurately, I highly recommend it.