# What Spanish Labels Have Taught the Chicago History Museum

*by Gary T. Johnson*

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When the Chicago History Museum opened its doors last year after a major renovation, one of the most noticeable changes was the presence of labels and signs with Spanish translations. Our institutional commitment to Spanish was my first initiative as President.

When I arrived in August 2005, it was an exciting time for us. After a long period of planning, the Museum was about to close for nine months for the rebuilding of most of our gallery space. During those first few months, I listened with fascination as my new colleagues brought me up to date on all of the plans for the building and for the new exhibitions.

I began to realize, however, that there was something missing: there were no plans to use any language except English in the new Museum's labels and signage. Using only English in our new Museum, I believed, would cause us to miss an important opportunity to make good on our key institutional goal of reaching Chicago's diverse communities and making them feel welcome in the Museum that tells the story of their city. When it comes to a museum's building and exhibition plans, good intentions need to take a very concrete and visible form.

My colleagues quickly agreed with me because they understood what has been happening in Chicago:

- More than 33 percent of school-aged children in the city are Latino.

We knew that the Latino population is young:

- Half of the Illinois Latino population is 25 years old or younger, compared to a median age of 36 for non-Latino residents.

Less understood was the fact that this explosive growth is a regional phenomenon:

- Between 1990 and 2000 the Latino population of Illinois grew by 69 percent, while the state's non-Latino population only increased by 3.5 percent.
- The Latino population is growing fastest in Chicago's suburbs, where Latinos already outnumber their counterparts in the city (Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame 2003).

Personally leading the Spanish-language initiative in the Museum became one of my first priorities. It was doubly satisfying for a new President: leading an outreach program and making a tangible contribution to a "once-in-a-generation" building project.

My other activities around the city reinforced the importance of this project. Once our Museum closed its doors, I began a program of visiting Chicago's schools with artifacts from the Great Chicago Fire. This attracted considerable media attention, but from my point of view the multi-lingual nature of Chicago's school population demanded my attention. The schools took a wide variety of approaches to the use of Spanish in the classroom. Sometimes, the students slid in and out of Spanish in asking me questions, but in other classes, there was an English-only policy. Even at those schools, I noticed that when the students broke up into groups to work with the artifacts, they often spoke to each other in Spanish. When we checked into the main office and visited the Principal, I noticed that many of the parents had almost no English skills. Nevertheless, even at schools that insisted on the use of English in the classrooms, Spanish-speaking office staff made the parents feel welcome and communicated with them about their shared concerns for the education of their children.

I began to wonder whether the Spanish labels alone would be enough. Was it too late in our planning to find another way to welcome our Latino community into the Museum? I found an opening. One of the last projects to take shape was our new lobby. Our curator, Peter Alter, walked me through the plans, which were designed to welcome visitors and to draw them in. Even while the Museum was closed, we dreamed that passers-by would press their noses to the window to see the treasures that we planned to install right up to our front door.

Peter told me that one of those treasures would be an automobile from our collection, a car that was available almost 100 years ago from the Sears catalogue. "You mean, there's room for a car in our lobby? Let's come up with a more exciting idea, one that would say something about our new museum." Peter and I hatched plans for installing a "lowrider," the kind of automobile that is found in many Hispanic neighborhoods. You've seen them: they ride low to the ground with small wheels, they have souped-up hydraulics so that they can "hop," and they are often decorated with murals and special interior furnishings. Peter found a car club to work with, and we commissioned our new Chicago History Museum lowrider. During the summer of 2006, I brought trustees and other visitors to the back yards and garages of the Amistad Car Club in Cicero, Illinois, and we saw our lowrider take shape. We were welcomed with extraordinary hospitality, and other lowrider clubs and neighborhood businesses eagerly contributed to the effort. When our car was ready to deliver, the Mayor of Cicero proclaimed a special lowrider celebration. You can see that procession, and learn the story of our lowrider, in the posting of a film that we made on You-Tube: http://youtube.com/watch?v=RrO5SLLxQXk.

Once the Museum's doors opened, the lowrider worked its magic. There it is, right in the lobby of a history museum. For members of the Latino community, there is the thrill of recognition. For others, there is curiosity, but the car, with its chain steering wheel, its special upholstery and its murals, is a hit. There have been a few puzzled questions from some of our long-time supporters, but there have been no serious critics.

The use of Spanish labels, however, does stir up critics. The criticisms come from two sources: English-only proponents and those who are offended at the choice of Spanish versus other languages. We answer every criticism that has a return address.

Sometimes it is clear that the English-only criticism is a form of bigotry, and those critics receive a very brief response. Much more often, however, it is clear that the writer is struggling with an issue that is troubling our nation as a whole. Those critics receive a longer response. We point out that we are a museum, and not a public school. It is not our job to take sides about the best method for teaching English to Spanish speakers. We simply want to welcome visitors and interest them in history. Some of our visitors do not speak English, and we want to draw them in. Some of our visitors need a polite history lesson. They assert that members of their own families learned English without any help, but we point out that in a city like Chicago, that claim is not entirely true. For example, the neighborhood where our Museum

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is located for a time had street signs in German! Often these critics have not considered that we welcome many international visitors to Chicago and that world-class museums often offer labels in more than one language. "Have you ever visited a museum in another country? Aren't you glad to find English translations?" I believe that a respectful dialogue about foreign-language labels is a "teaching moment," even for critics with an "English-only" point of view.

Sometimes writers insist that we add labels in other languages, alongside the Spanish labels. One writer asked us, "What do I say to my child who asked me, 'why don't they want Grandma to know about Chicago history?'" Again, a respectful dialogue is in order and both sides can learn something. We point out that there are practical issues to adding labels in multiple languages, and there are issues of cost in adding a new set of translations. We do, of course, want Grandma to learn about Chicago history, and we plan to add new languages to our audio tours. For some exhibitions, we may consider including labels in languages other than Spanish and English.

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Preparing Spanish labels taught us practical lessons, all of which add up to "know your audience." We use a commercial translation service, but the key is to name one staff member as the guardian of the texts for each language. If you don't have the right language skills on staff, then I can imagine giving this job to somebody outside of the staff. The person chosen should develop a stylebook that incorporates new insights about how to use translations to serve the Museum's mission and reach its target audiences. We mark our stylistic suggestions before the service begins its work.

Knowing your target audience will point you to the right form of Spanish to use. While we receive many European visitors in Chicago, in our own city, the native Spanish speakers overwhelmingly come from Mexico, Puerto Rico and Central America. For us, Latin American Spanish is an easy choice, and outside translation services are experienced at using a generalized Latin American idiom that side-steps local expressions. For certain exhibitions, we might request a more localized approach; for example, Puerto Rican expressions for an exhibition with a Puerto Rican focus.

The stylebook needs a very local perspective. In the Chicago's Spanish-speaking community, the White Sox are just that, "los White Sox," but it turns out the Cubs are not "los Cubs," they are "los Cuchillos." Often, our local audience uses the usual English term, as with street names.

To my knowledge, our choices of Spanish idiom have never been questioned, but we all need to remember that word choices are a great point of pride in communities.

When English and Spanish labels are set side-by-side, what is striking is how much longer the Spanish text is. English is a relatively compact language. As with baseball, so with label design: it's a game of inches! Designers need to understand that when the Spanish text arrives, it will require at least a third more space to say the same thing. (The same is true to varying degrees with other languages.)

The problem of length offers two approaches that we reject. We do not offer the Spanish labels in smaller type than the English text, and we do not shorten the Spanish text. Either solution would suggest a lack of respect.

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We do, however, sometimes use English-only labels and offer the Spanish text in other formats. For special exhibitions, we often choose a printed format for the translations. We try to make the printed page look as much like the English label as possible. These are available from a rack at the beginning of the exhibition, and we ask that they be returned at the end. Sometimes our visitors walk off with them, which is not what we intend, but we do take as a compliment. I regret that our new permanent exhibition on Chicago history was designed shortly before I arrived and we made a commitment to Spanish texts. All of its labels are in English. We can see, though, that in such an exhibition, where many of the labels are long, the problem of adding a Spanish text would be substantial. We have not prepared a Spanish hand-out because it would be very long, almost book length. Instead, from the time the exhibition opened, we have included a Spanish-language tour of this exhibition as one of our museum's audio tours.

The Crown Room is where our school groups gather to begin and end their visits, and where most of them have lunch. This is one place where the Spanish translation has a different emphasis from the English. Our new tagline highlights our connection with Chicago: "Chicago begins here," but in Spanish, we say, "Aquí empieza su ciudad." Literally, "Your city begins here." That's the message we want to communicate to all of our schoolchildren; that's what we want to communicate to the whole community, including the newcomers.

We will continue to add Spanish to our galleries and our museum operations, and we will look for ways to add other languages, as well, with Polish being the next highest priority. Whatever society at large may decide about the best way to teach English, we believe that the use of other languages is a very tangible way for museums to make good on our promises to welcome and serve the wider community.

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