



# Mexican-American

## I. History and Social Context

The Southwest region of the United States has been strongly influenced by Spanish rule, Mexican rule, and ultimately that of the United States of America. The population of the south part of Texas, in particular, continues to have strong ties to Mexican culture with most counties recorded to be more than 50% Hispanic and many recorded to be between 80-90% Hispanic. New Mexico and southern California have high numbers of people who speak Spanish as a first language.

The conquering of the indigenous people and their native languages by the Spaniards was the first of two major conquests in this area. The second was that of The United States and its English influence. The close proximity of the area to Mexico results in strong cultural and racial influences on many levels including language. People in this area speak English, Spanish and sometimes a combination of the two called “Spanglish.”

Characteristics or influences of a Mexican-American dialect include a pliable tip of the tongue, pure vowel sounds, and—in some of this region—a Southern drawl.

## II. Sound Placement

*Where the sound “lives” in the mouth.*

The sound is placed slightly more forward than Neutral American. It resonates in the front of the face and has a nasal quality. The jaw needs to be relaxed, more open than many people may be used to; this causes the tongue to be more responsible for articulation.





### III. Intonation Pattern

*Musicality, lilt, inflection and stress.*

The speech rhythm is generally very even. Spanish speakers are used to a continuation of sound between words and rarely use the glottal stop, so there is a great deal of linking from one word to the next. This linking may also cause many ending consonant sounds to be dropped. Additionally, the Spanish language uses more pure vowel sounds compared to English vowel diphthongs. As a result, vowel sounds—especially diphthongs—may seem clipped or shortened in English. The intonation pattern tends to include a downward inflection in pitch at the ends of phrases.

Listen for the influence of American English on the recordings with this download, especially the Texas dialect. This will include elongation of vowels and a hard “r” sound when speaking in English. Similar sounds occur in other Mexican-American accents even further north in the United States.

### IV. Helpful Hints

It can always be helpful to start with a stereotype of an accent when first learning it. Perhaps the strongest stereotype of a Mexican accent is Speedy Gonzales. Overall, the sound changes are accurate, and the intonation pattern is an extreme exaggeration of the rhythm and musicality, but it is truly over the top. In order to avoid falling too strongly into this stereotypical Mexican accent, focus on the influence of the Spanish language and do not over do the nasal quality.

Because Spanish is written more phonetically than English, speakers may tend to pronounce extra or all sounds in a word (i.e. pronouncing the “l” in *salmon*). Similarly, the way a word is spelled may influence the pronunciation, especially in a person who is less fluent in English. The heavier the accent, the more all syllables (and words) will be stressed, even the normally unstressed syllables (*professional, family, fortune*).

Relax the jaw and focus on articulating with the tongue. Pronouncing a phrase in Spanish and then going into English is a helpful way to allow the influence of the language to create the dialect. Listen to short passages from the recorded samples and repeat their manner of speech. If you can record yourself at the same time, it may serve you even better as you can hear both the recording and yourself from a more objective position.

Erre con erre, guitarra;  
erre con erre, carril:  
rápido ruedan los carros,  
rápido el ferrocarril.



## V. Sound Substitutions

*Changes in individual speech sounds (from a Neutral American dialect).*

*Listen carefully to the recordings that will guide you through this section.*

*The phonetic symbols are decoded in the shaded boxes.*

**Special Consideration:** There are several sounds that are unique to Mexican-Spanish speech. Some of them may occur in English pronunciation as well. Listen to the recording to hear these sounds: the ñ consonant sound [ɲ.j] as in the word *baño*, the *rr* trilled-R consonant sound [r] as in the word *perro*, and the *ll* consonant sound [j] as in the word *pollo*.

### Consonants:

1. The Spanish language has no words that contain the “th-“ sounds, so [θ] and [ð] become dentalized. This means that the tongue pops on the back of the upper teeth (instead of going between the upper and lower teeth for the TH-sounds). The resulting sound is something more like [t] or [d]:  
*theme, thing, thistle, nothing, myth, bathhouse;*  
*these, them, there, bathing, scythe, breathe, the*

[θ] = thing  
[ð] = these

**Practice:** My father bought this thing for the bathroom.

2. a) The [ʃ] may turn into [tʃ] in the primary position:  
*she, shape, shock*  
b) The [tʃ] may turn into [ʃ] in the medial or final position:  
*butcher, watching*

[ʃ] = ship  
[tʃ] = chip

**Practice:** She was watching the butcher reach for the meat.

3. Consonant sounds in consonant clusters or at the ends of words may be dropped:

*“I will ask you” becomes “I will as\_ you.”*

*“Beyond the light winds” becomes “Beyon\_ de ligh\_ wins.”*

**Practice:** What kinds of classes must you take first?



4. Overall, plosives are lighter—there is less force to them:  
*pop, bad, good, take, cap, dripping, double, couldn't*

**Practice:** Big, tall people tend to attack the goal quickly.

5. Voiced consonants may become unvoiced. This is especially true at the ends of words and with the consonant sounds [z] and [ʒ]:

[z] = zoo  
[ʒ] = meazure

*rob, sad, pig, have, breathe;  
has, please, choose, houses, classes;  
beige, pleasure, measure, asian, closure*

**Practice:** I find pleasure in saying the ends of words properly.

6. In a heavier accent, [h] at the beginning of a word or syllable may be dropped:  
*whole, behind, hot, hammer, hand, health, humor*

**Practice:** I think he hurt his hand carrying a heavy load.

7. In a heavier accent, [j] at the beginning of a word may become [dʒ]:  
*yes, young, yellow, you, yesterday*

[j] = yellow  
[dʒ] = judge

**Practice:** Yes, you are the youngest to serve on the jury.

### Vowels:

*There are five vowel sounds in Spanish, “a, e, i, o, u.” These are pronounced [a], [e], [i], [o] & [u]. The pure vowel sounds of Spanish will influence the pronunciation of the vowels in English. One major result is that the short and long vowel sounds may be confused. Overall, you should tend to keep the sounds short and clipped.*

[a] = father  
[e] = stay  
[i] = eat  
[o] = obey  
[u] = shoe



1. [æ] tends to become [ɑ]:

*laugh, master, rather, last, exact, command, chance, fancy*

[ɑ] = father  
[æ] = cat

**Practice:** I thought that fancy car was faster, but it came in last.

2. In a heavier accent, [ʌ] becomes rounded, sounding like [ʊ]:

*up, supper, love, above, abrupt, lunch*

[ʌ] = up  
[ʊ] = good

**Practice:** I'd love to have fun for a month up there.

3. In a heavier accent, [ɪ] may become more like [i]:

*it, fish, driven, written, kissed, gift*

[ɪ] = it  
[i] = eat

**Practice:** If it's fishing you love, this spot's just what you wish for.

### **Diphthongs:**

1. [ou] shifts to the Spanish pure vowel, changing to [o:]:

*oh, go, old, poem, emotional*

[ou] = show

**Practice:** Only moments later, the rope broke unexpectedly.

2. In heavier accents, [eɪ] may become the pure Spanish [e:]:

*ache, chafe, pay, aid, weigh, amaze, aim*

[eɪ] = pay

**Practice:** We had an amazing day but we couldn't stay.



## VI. Alternate Pronunciations

*Don't be confused by the phonetics; the words will be pronounced on the recording.*

Tejana/o	[te'ha.no]	Mexican-American from Texas.
Aztlan	[az'lan]	Mythical Aztec city, symbol of paradise
Mexican Cumbia	['kum.bi.a]	Popular music/dance
Tejas	['te.jas]	Texas
Ranchera	[ran'tʃe.ra]	Traditional song of Mexico
Mariachi	[ma. ri'a.tʃi]	Mexican musical group
Pachuco	[pa'tʃu.ko]	Mexican-American youths in the 1930's-1940's
Zoot Suit	[zut sut]	Long draped suits popular in the 1930's-1940's
ese	['ese]	dude
cholo	[tʃo.lo]	Working class Mexican-American
Virgin Guadalupe	['vɪr.hɪn gwa.da'lu.pe]	"La Virgin Morena" or "brown-skinned virgin appeared to Juan Diego in 16 <sup>th</sup> century Mexico. She is a major cultural and religious symbol.

*Words that came from the Aztec vocabulary may follow the Aztec pronunciation:*

tomate	[to'ma.te]
chocolate	[,tʃo.ko'la.te]
cacao	[ka'ka.o]
coyote	[ko'jo.te]
chicle	['tʃi.kle]



Our Lady of Guadalupe Church



## VII. Additional Practice Material

*When learning an accent, it is most useful to listen to recordings of native speakers. This section provides a brief list of scripts, films, television programs that may be helpful for further study.*

### **Scripts:**

The following are Mexican-American playwrights/plays

Mayer, Oliver—*Blade to the Heat*, others

Mena, Alicia—*Las Nuevas Tamaras*

Portillo, Estella—*Day of the Swallows*

Sanchez-Scott, Milcha—*Roosters, Dog Lady*, others

Solis, Octavio—*Santos y Santos, Man of the Flesh*, others

Valdez, Luis—*Zoot Suit, Bandido!, Bernabé*, others

### **Film, Television, Audiobooks:**

Some additional examples to work with:

Edward James Olmos films: *Selena* (Jennifer Lopez who plays the lead character is strongly influenced by her Puerto Rican dialect, however this film is shot in South Texas), *Stand and Deliver*, *American Me*, *Zoot Suit*, others

*Mi Familia/My Family*—Many Mexican-American actors in this film

*The George Lopez Show*—Both Constance Marie and George Lopez are Mexican-

American

*American Family*—PBS Series with Edward James Olmos, Constance Marie, and others

*Nacho Libre*—a lot of the secondary characters are natives: not Jack Black  
The International Dialects of English Archive: <http://web.ku.edu/idea/> There are a few samples from Mexico, but there are also a number of Mexicans that are listed within the border states.

Cheech Marin films: (born in LA, of Mexican descent) He uses strong stereotypes in a lot of his comedic films, but allows his accent to be lighter in others: *Spy Kids*, *Cars*, *The Lion King*, *Tin Cup*.

These materials may not be duplicated or distributed without the consent of the authors. In order to distribute these materials to a larger group or for information on coaching accents for actors, please contact Michelle Lopez-Rios or Jim Johnson for further details:

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**Mexican-American** sound files:

*featuring Accent Help coach Michelle Lopez-Rios*

- 01 Intro
- 02 Consonants
- 03 Vowels
- 04 Diphthongs
- 05 Words
- 06 Wrap up
  
- 07 Brownsville Male reading
- 08 + his conversation
- 09 2<sup>nd</sup> Brownsville Male reading
- 10 + his conversation
- 11 Brownsville Female reading
- 12 + her conversation
- 13 3<sup>rd</sup> Brownsville Male reading
- 14 + his conversation
- 15 Mexico Male reading
- 16 + his conversation
- 17 Mexico Female reading
- 18 + her conversation
- 19 Monterrey Male reading
- 20 + his conversation
- 21 Mexico Female reading
- 22 + her conversation
- 23 2<sup>nd</sup> Monterrey Male reading
- 24 + his conversation
- 25 Mexico City Female reading
- 26 + her conversation
- 27 Nuevo Leon Female reading
- 28 + her conversation
- 29 3<sup>rd</sup> Brownsville Male Spanish reading
- 30 Brownsville Female Spanish reading

Speakers recorded by Michelle Lopez-Rios,  
Callina Anderson, Noe Mendoza III,  
Jenny Haskins, Reesa Graham, Jon  
Levy, Alex Wheeler and JoAnne Davis  
Jones.

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*The English Reading:*

<i>These</i>	<i>Wash</i>	<i>Are</i>
<i>Things</i>	<i>Bottle</i>	<i>About</i>
<i>Bait</i>	<i>Ball</i>	<i>Avoid</i>
<i>Get</i>	<i>Lost</i>	<i>Quarter</i>
<i>Ready</i>	<i>Roar</i>	<i>Burn</i>
<i>Bat</i>	<i>Button</i>	<i>Fear</i>
<i>And</i>	<i>Going</i>	<i>Share</i>
<i>End</i>	<i>Butcher</i>	<i>Par</i>
<i>Ant</i>	<i>Coupon</i>	<i>Pour</i>
<i>Ask</i>	<i>Buying</i>	<i>Poor</i>
<i>Aunt</i>	<i>Hour</i>	
<i>Father</i>	<i>Our</i>	

*The Rainbow Passage*

*When the sunlight strikes raindrops in the air, they act as a prism and form a rainbow. The rainbow is a division of white light into many beautiful colors. These take the shape of a long round arch, with its path high above, and its two ends apparently beyond the horizon. There is, according to legend, a boiling pot of gold at one end. People look, but no one ever finds it. When a man looks for something beyond his reach, his friends say he is looking for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.*

*The Spanish Reading:*

agua	anoche	calló
gente	chocolate	cayo
que	cuanto	corazón
un gato	los canos	plaza
un queso	cada	próximo
un hueso	casa	examen
hombre	caza	Quixote
ella	cara	México
bella	caro	pero
amarillo	carro	perro

**La noche**

Las estrellas bailan en el cielo cuando viene la noche. Y también el ruido de las ranas juntos con los grillos llena el aire. La luna brilla la luz en los árboles y los arbustos. El viento tiene razón cuando susurro en las hojas. Colores de oscuro. Sonidos de silencio. Olor de magia. En este tiempo hacen los sueños de la tierra.