

“Español Moderno” for Chinese: The Influence of Colonial Thought on Spanish-American Cultural Discourse

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Abstract: During two years of analysis of thesis projects for the graduation of bachelor's degree in Spanish language, deficiencies have been found in the students of the Spanish faculty of Hebei International Studies University, China, to assume and reproduce the idea of Spanish America as a heterogeneous conglomerate, therefore it was determined to study the idea of cultural diversity disseminated by the books for the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language in China. In this case, the *Español Moderno 1 Student's Book* and the *Español Moderno 1 Reading Books* were selected because they are the most widely used in universities and constitute the first learning section. Software-assisted qualitative analysis was used, establishing a coding system for the cultural information that made it possible to identify the cultural information with which the idea of the Hispanic American subject and society is constructed. Together with the ethnographic work with the students, it was concluded that the cultural information is dispersed, incoherent and superficial. It offers a vision of Hispanic America equated to Spain, understanding this as a region of Christian society, Spanish-speaking population and Latin culture with peculiar details and touristic landscapes. The book offers an inconsistent cultural education environment, which puts students at risk of making cultural mistakes during immersion in any Spanish-speaking cultural context. The Hispanic American cultural reality needs to be presented in a respectful and accurate manner. This implies decolonizing the perception and understanding Hispanic America from Hispanic America and not through colonial filters that seek to perpetuate a constricted vision, fertilized by ethnocentric analysis and denial of reality.

Keywords: Spain, Latin America, Spanish Language, Cultural Diversity, Ethnocentrism, Ethnocentrism

1. Introduction

The Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America and the Caribbean constitute a cultural complex that cannot be summarized in a few texts. It is unrealistic to try to place, in a few pages, the diversity of peoples with a millenary history prior to the arrival of Christopher Columbus and other colonizers, since the history of the original peoples is a determining factor in the cultural reality of the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America. Furthermore, the Spanish-speaking population is found in this region, and although the language is a legacy of colonization, it is not accurate to understand, for a study, the Hispanic American region as a homogeneous conglomerate.

Transversal issues such as ethnocentrism, colonial thinking, the partial information reproduced by cultural reproduction agencies when they represent the ideology of an enclosed

reality, symbolic violence through the imposition of cultural codes are aspects to analyze and establish relationships between the information present in the books *Español Moderno Student's Book 1* and *Español Moderno Reading Book 1*, the Hispanic American cultural reality and the knowledge generated in the students.

The interest in this topic arose from the deficiencies found in graduate students of the Spanish language faculty of Hebei International Studies University to assume and reproduce the idea of Hispanic America as a heterogeneous conglomerate and the final intention of this work is to provide an environment where the learning process is constituted in the least possible symbolic cost and the most genuine cultural information.

2. Background of the Problem

For two years, it has been observed, in the reproduction of the knowledge acquired by the students, a significant deficit of information about the Hispanic American cultural reality. Despite having specialized bibliography on cultural topics, teams of foreign professors with solid knowledge on methodologies and strategies for the successful development of the teaching-learning process, there is an erroneous and limited perception on cultural aspects of the social and cultural reality of the Spanish-speaking countries in the Latin American and Caribbean region, which is manifested in the process of preparation and discussion of the degree theses. This has been proven from the development of thesis tutorials with a focus on the Hispanic American reality and during evaluation tribunals on the same subject. In discussion groups formed by professors of different subjects, but all related to diverse cultural aspects in the Spanish-speaking region of Latin America and the Caribbean. The main reason that leads to the choice of the set of books *Español Moderno Student's Book 1* and *Español Moderno Reading Book 1* is, for being the most used in universities in China.

2.1. Previous Reviews of Textbooks for Learning Spanish as a Foreign Language

There is no shortage of research where the cultural content of textbooks acts as a central object. From different approaches, the aim is to analyze the aspects contained in the preparation of a learning material. In 2012, the 2008 edition of the *Español Moderno* textbook did not yet have the updated regulations for the use of the Spanish language as established by the Association of Spanish Language Academies. [1] For this same manual, the Analysis of the Chinese manual of ELE: *Español Moderno* is carried out, where the linguistic and pedagogical theory used in the teaching of Spanish is improved [2] and as the author concludes, "the idea of teaching Spanish from Spanish, not from Chinese, because they have nothing to do" is a matter of recognizing cultural differences and understanding the other culture as equally respectable.

For the 2014 edition of *Español Moderno En Boletín de ASELE*, Matías Hidalgo Gallardo reviews the manual *Español Moderno* where he raises the evident pedagogical and methodological obsolescence [3] despite repeated editions, in addition to the fact that, as he states very coherently, the sociocultural knowledge explained only in Chinese language limits the Spanish-speaking teacher from subjecting the content of the text to criticism. In the same way, it restricts the possibility of stimulating the student's curiosity by contrasting a text in his or her language and the same text in the language to be learned.

In a critical analysis of the discourse in three materials for teaching Spanish as a foreign language, in 2020, the creation of neo-liberal stereotypes was observed due to the erroneous approach to values and sociocultural aspects offered to the student [4]. This study was limited to Spanish society. Although these materials do not include the text *Español*

Moderno, they are part of the series of books that reproduce a distorted view of the cultural environment of the Spanish language.

Another review of the book *Español Moderno* in 2020 [5] notes the structure and methods used, clarifies the preference for books edited by Chinese authors and books edited in Spain as auxiliary material. In this case, there is no mention of the language variant used for the preparation of the edition, nor is there a critical review, but a descriptive review of the text. Another interesting analysis with the intention of delving into the cultural component is the study of *Español Moderno* reading books, although it is based on quantifiable aspects and the qualities of the information are not analyzed. It is not considered that quantities can be biased by qualities. More quantity does not mean legitimacy or certainty in the cultural information offered. The author states well that, "according to the introduction to the manuals, their main purpose is to enrich the knowledge of the language, the laws that regulate it and increase the vocabulary, which will have an impact on an improvement of their oral and written expression" [6], but these books constitute objects of cultural reproduction where the other is represented as a subject or group carrying culture. To omit these characteristics is to misinform and misrepresent an objective reality of the language represented mostly in the region of Latin America and the Caribbean where Spanish is spoken as an official language or by cultural influence.

2.2. Hispanic America as a Region of Cultural Diversity

It is valid to clarify that Hispanic America is not a historical-cultural entity equivalent to Spain, because from the perspective that pretends to perform an analysis of the cultural components, if it starts from an erroneous position and is located in the wrong place to perform the analysis, the probability of erroneous conclusions increases; that is to say, pretending to homologate Hispanic America and Spain is a taxonomic error because while Spain is a country, Hispanic America is a geographical region made up of nineteen countries.

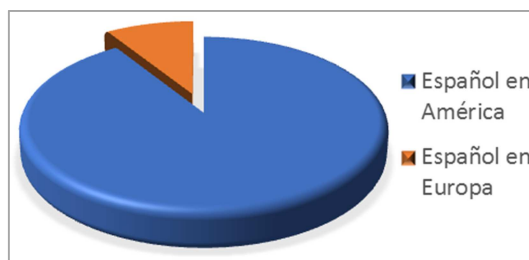


Figure 1. Proportion of Spanish speakers in the Americas in relation to Europe.

Both the Spanish language variant and the cultural information are biased towards Spain and marginalize the Spanish-speaking majority, and it is not made clear in the texts which language variant is being referred to. It is perfectly understandable that a Spanish language course is aimed at deepening the knowledge of a specific variant,

however, it is a mistake to pretend to sell itself as the representation of the language when it only characterizes a minority.

Issues such as interests, aspirations, projects, ambitions, tendencies, curiosities are fixed in the process of cultural assimilation in relation to the environment. It should be considered that the person interested in learning Spanish as a foreign language has two possibilities of environment, from his or her own reality or from a location in the Spanish-speaking context.

In the Spanish-speaking context, the learner will be able to appropriate the reality with which he/she establishes contact. But it is from that reality and no other. If he/she studies Spanish in Mexico, Argentina or Venezuela, he/she will assume the characteristics of the variant of the language present in those countries and not another. This in turn does not guarantee that the student will have accurate information about the cultural reality of the region, but only about the environment in which he or she was formed. However, whether the knowledge is produced from the distance of the Latin American and Caribbean cultural context or in a more favorable environment, it is imperative to establish an informative dynamic that embraces the cultural reality of the other as legitimate and respectable, and in this case one of the means to establish the flow of information is through books, which are objects that reproduce culture. It is necessary to guarantee that the texts used, in their content, respectfully reproduce the cultural identity of the language they represent and construct the idea of Latin America as a region of legitimate cultural diversity. The recurrence in the research visualizes Hispanic America as a demarcation of Hispanic culture in the American continent. It is not conceived as a region made up of a cultural complexity but as an imagined reproduced "Hispanic gene" where more than 400 million inhabitants, including the great mass of original groups, are compared with the Iberian Peninsula.

In the discourse on Hispanic America, seen from the academic, cultural, social and political activities in Spanish language, there is an ethnocentric and colonial character that reproduces the ideology of the subaltern agent, the inferior native subject of Latin America and the Caribbean.

The permanent homologation of Spain and Latin America is an erroneous approach to analysis because it is not possible to compare one country with nineteen. Unless the ethnocentric approach hinders the reasoning process.

The adulterated discourse is reproduced and stimulates the creation of stereotypes and nonsense such as the idea of "race", the existence of "Indians" in the Latin American and Caribbean region or the intention to differentiate culture with a capital and a small letter, and any characteristic that distinguishes the other as a subaltern agent. This is nothing more than a repetition of ethnocentrism and colonial thinking that reproduces ideologies alien to diverse sociocultural environments. Spanish must be studied from the

characteristics of the language, but also from the cultural diversity that this implies.

3. Features of These Books

The books *Español Moderno Student's Book 1* and *Español Moderno Reading Book 1* were shaped according to the characteristics of education in China, which does not condition that the cultural content should be subordinated to the criteria of the external agent. Although not stated, the books tell a story, in addition to the one proposed as an objective. Through images, presentations or omissions, knowledge and perception of the other is constructed. In this ethnographic-narrative study, cultural information about Hispanic America was observed from the discourse offered by the books *Español Moderno Student's Book 1* and *Español Moderno Reading Book 1*.

The elements present in the books that inform about the set of traditions and lifestyle acquired by the members of a society through social interaction, where their ways of feeling, thinking and acting are included are part of the cultural information, understanding culture as "the learned set of traditions and lifestyles, socially acquired, of the members of a society, including their patterned and repetitive ways of thinking, feeling and acting (that is, their behavior)", which is continuity of the definition posed by Sir Edward Burnett Tylor that refers in the same text:

"Culture... in its ethnographic sense, is that complex whole comprising knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs and any other capacities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. The condition of culture in the various societies of humanity, in so far as it can be investigated according to general principles, constitutes a suitable subject for the study of the laws of human thought and action." [7].

Cultural diversity is understood as "the multiplicity of forms in which the cultures of groups and societies manifest themselves. These expressions are transmitted within and between groups and societies. Cultural diversity is manifested not only through the diverse forms in which the cultural heritage of humankind is expressed, enriched and transmitted through a variety of cultural expressions, but also through the different modes of artistic creation, production, distribution, dissemination and enjoyment, whatever the medium and technology used. [8] Codes were established for the analysis of the cultural content in these books to visualize how, through the Spanish language as a foreign language, an imaginary identity of Spanish-speaking subjects in the Latin American and Caribbean area is constructed.

According to the books *Español Moderno libro del estudiante 1* and *Español Moderno Libro de lectura 1*, the Spanish-speaking countries are made up of a mostly young population, with a predominance people with red hair and slightly dark hair, with a slightly higher number of females than males.

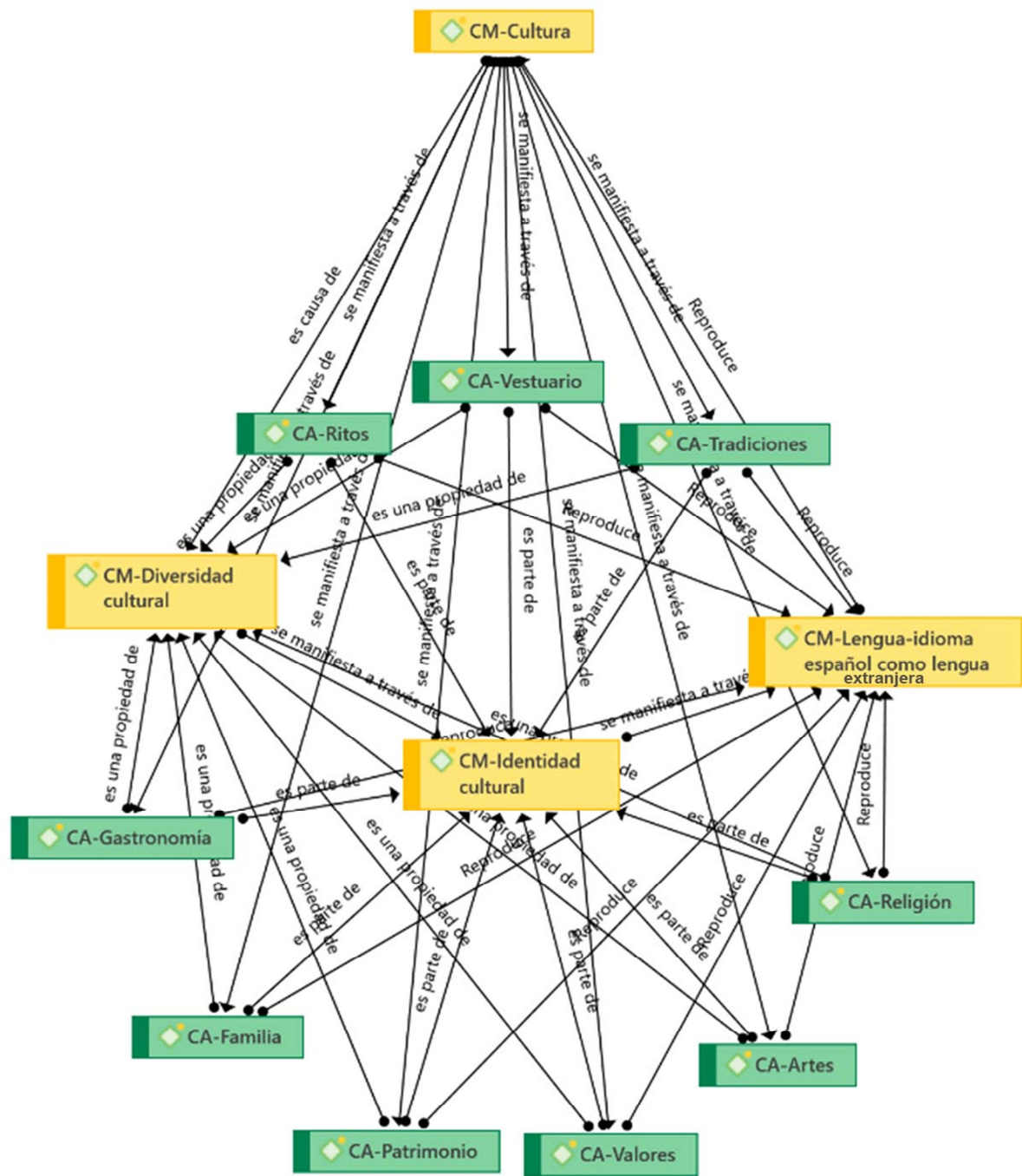


Figure 2. List of codes to analyze cultural information.

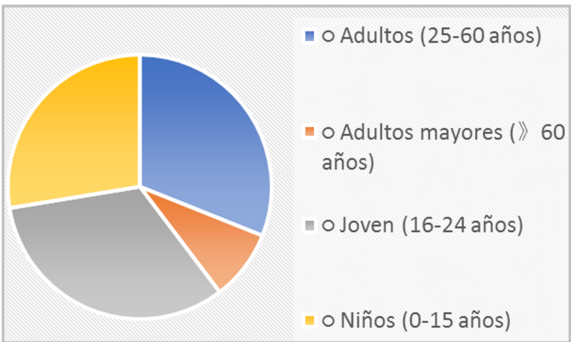


Figure 3. Spanish-speaking population by age group.

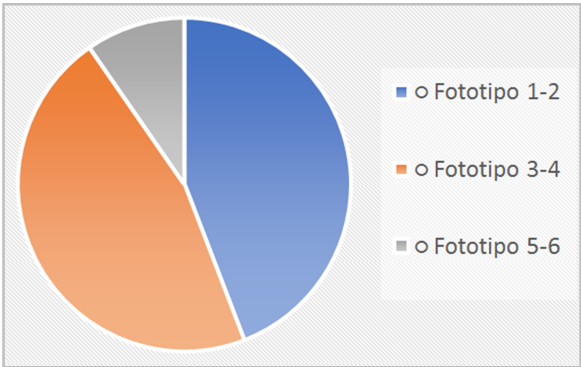


Figure 4. Phenotype, appearance of persons according to phototype.

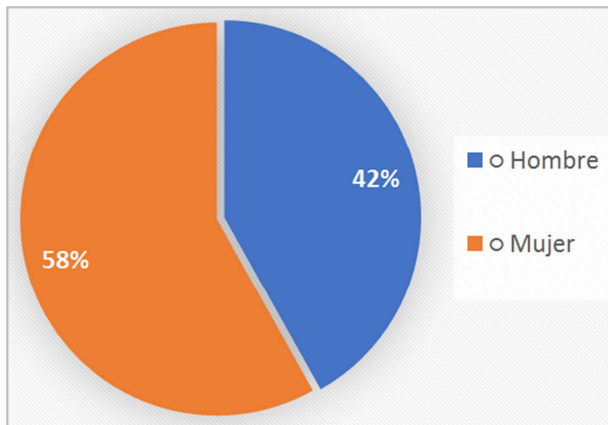


Figure 5. Population according to male/female gender.

Regarding the cultural aspects that support the evident cultural diversity of the Spanish language at the international level, it is shown that only nine countries in the Latin American area are represented in way, as well as the cultural representation of Spain at 59% although it represents only 9% of the Spanish-speaking population at the world level.

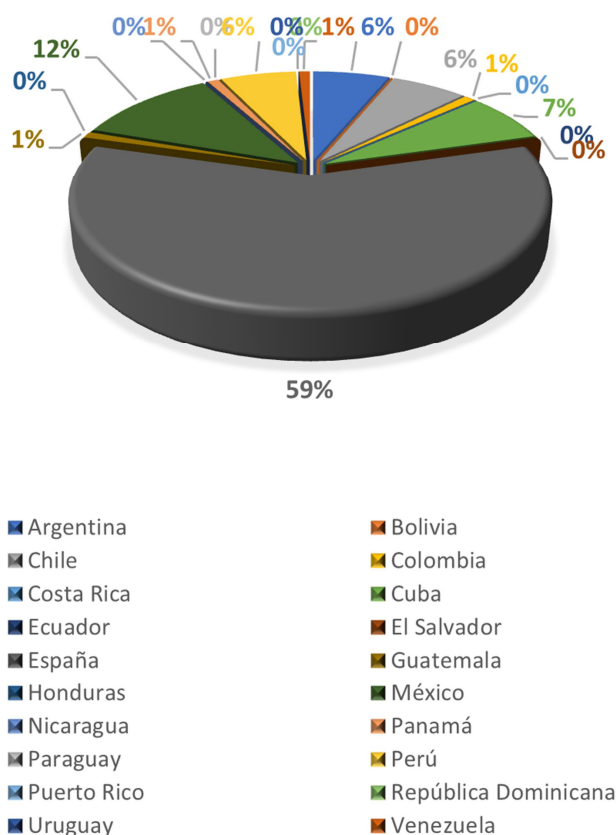


Figure 6. Countries of Latin America and Spain: cultural representation.

Cultural information on nations outside the Spanish-speaking context exceeds that on any of the Spanish-speaking countries.

And issues to be considered for establishing relationships in any cultural context, such as information on family, values and housing, are omitted and considered homogeneous for all cultural contexts (Figure 8).

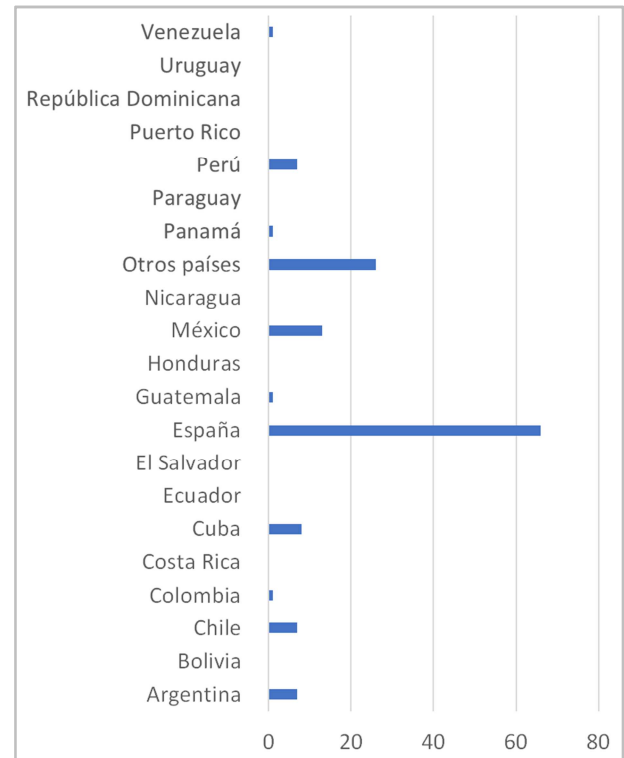


Figure 7. Cultural information: Spanish American countries, Spain and other countries outside the Spanish-speaking context.

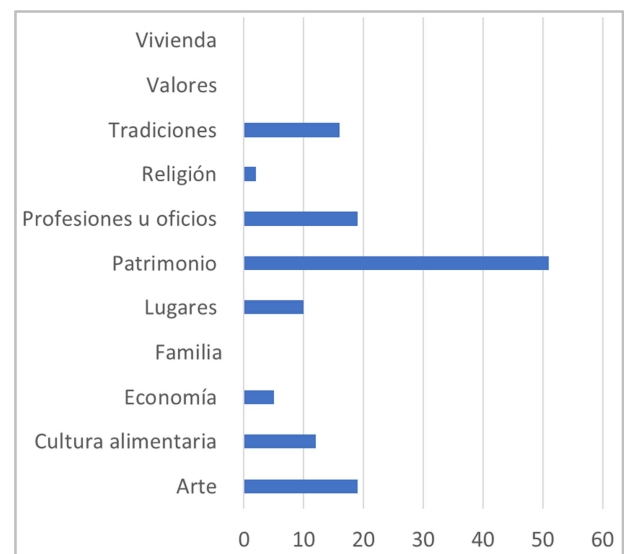


Figure 8. Current cultural information.

4. Ethnocentrism and Colonialism: The Dark Cloak over Latin America¹

The debate on coloniality and the necessary decoloniality emerged at the end of the 20th century, specifically in the 1990s, with Anibal Quijano's analysis of modernity, where he

¹ Although the historical processes related to the issues of coloniality are part of the sociopolitical and cultural configuration in the Latin American and Caribbean region, Spanish America will be used to delimit the study since this work focuses on the sociocultural information of the Spanish-speaking countries of the region.

considers this as a process under which coloniality is disguised in its constitutive dimension.

The analysis of coloniality, with emphasis first in Latin America and later deployed worldwide as a new historical horizon stripped of European ethnocentrism, resulted in a new current for conceiving and describing the Hispanic American reality. While it is true that all societies and human groups tend to ethnocentrism based on the valuation of what is their own, the ethnocentric character to the detriment of what is foreign is grotesque.

The concept of coloniality, in praxis, makes it possible to identify the information where the colonial discourse that falsifies the diverse Hispanic American cultural reality is reproduced. In turn, ethnocentrism as an inclination to interpret reality from one's own cultural precepts, is shown in its darkest side when colonial thought is reproduced in it.

The process of gnoseological production under which the idea of Hispano-American society was constructed began then to deconstruct itself from the decolonial perspective to form another reality where the epistemological criteria are constructed in one's own realities and not from foreign contexts because, the creation of identity from the white and Eurocentric reference is predominant, since identities are constructed by the devices of domination or "from above", however, black and indigenous subjects and social groups have also built their ways of inhabiting the world and understanding it without the need to link them only to the European reference. [9].

The challenge to hegemonic Eurocentric thinking was constituted from the questioning of power and the intention to transform the historical-social reality by critical thinking, so that the colonial power pattern proposed categories and concepts to delimit the cultural reality of the region, where the historical experience was distorted by the intention to civilize. The historical system and its criteria imposed by the dominant ethnocentric and colonial power attributed to itself the capacity to subtract prestige to those who did not agree with its epistemological principles, and thus the exclusion of other ways of doing and knowing the world was reproduced in the subalternity of the other subject. It cannot be denied that the testimony of necessity over colonial dispossession is evident in the culture of resistance of both the original groups and the enslaved when they have made their cultural nuclei endure over time. Enriched yes, but not relegated.

The Hispano-American cultural reality cannot be conceived without the legacy and the aboriginal, European, African and other latitudes' presence in all its gnoseological dimension, but the imposition of identities from the Eurocentric paradigm reproduces the construction of otherness and sameness as antagonistic agents where the other subject must be formed from the imaginary, in a cognitive subject related to the criteria stipulated by the colonial discourse.

The intention, the action of vindicating cultural processes and actions to recognize the Hispano-American subject are not efficient when they are constituted only as a declaration. This process is formed by strategies and forms of contestation, which establish the assumption of the subject as

the legitimate agent owner of a cultural identity, and not the claim for acceptance from the appropriation of foreign cultural codes.

The distance from colonization to civilization is infinite [10] and what happened in Spanish America was a process of colonization with all its savage costumes. No matter how well argued an idea, postulate or thesis may be, it cannot be dependable if it is built from the colonial principle, where the external agent believes itself to be the owner of a superiority or cultural criterion that it must impose on its antagonist. Precisely the coloniality of knowledge "is kept alive in learning manuals, in the criteria for good academic work, in culture, common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in the aspirations of subjects, and in so many other aspects of our modern experience", [11] therefore, in the epistemic framework that encompasses coloniality, the role of culture and all its hiding places are paramount to free ourselves from the agonizing colonial model and begin to be part of the decolonial process.

The idea that the cultural aspects of the Spanish language can be summarized as a totality is a clear epistemological misrepresentation that ignores diversity and reproduces misinterpreted concepts of historical materialism.

In the Hispanic American region, the diversity of native groups, with their own social systems, showed that not all members of a society are subordinated and are constructed as subjects akin to the dominant culture. However, communication between the dominant culture and other forms of interpretation of reality constitute a field of mutual enrichment where the historical relations of coexistence determine the degree of correlation between the two cultures.

The relations between the diverse marginalized Hispanic American cultures where the symbolic universe deteriorated and the dominant classes producing a foreign and imposed cultural system conformed a cultural syncretism with more regional than frontier character where a colored society can neither homogenize itself nor submit to comparison with its neighbor. All this scaffolding of knowledge is currently questioned because the Hispano-American perspective, in its decolonial option, provides new alternatives for knowledge based on the reconstitution of the intersubjectivity of the Hispano-American individual through the appropriation of his own aesthetic concepts, no longer imposed by imitation to form part of the dominant, European and modern culture but assumed by the subjective liberation of honoring and liberating everything marginalized by Eurocentric cultural domination.

Representing the cultural reflection of "Nuestra America" [12] in a respectful and accurate way implies decolonizing perception and understanding Hispanic America from Hispanic America and not through colonial filters that seek to perpetuate a constrained vision fertilized by ignorance. The Spanish language was reproduced by the colonial process, but it was also irrigated in identity and the greatest proof of the impact of cultural diversity in the transformation of the language is in the existence of multiple national variants that mold in community of powers its current form. Martí had already stated this in the 19th century:

“Buena lengua nos dio España, pero nos parece que no ha de quejarse de que se la maltratemos: quien quiera oír a Tirsos y Argensolas, ni en Valladolid mismo los busque, aunque es fama que hablan muy bien español los vallisoletanos:—búsquelos entre las mozas apuestas y mancebos humildes de la América del Centro, donde aún se llama galán a un hombre hermoso, o en Caracas, donde a las contribuciones dicen pechos, o en México altiva, donde al trabajar llaman, como Moreto en una comedia, “hacer la lucha”. Y en cuanto a las leyes de la lengua, no hay duda de que Baralt, Bello y Cuervo son sus más avisados legisladores:—lo cual no quita lustre al habla en que con singular donosura dicen literarios pensamientos los varones del Guadalquivir y Manzanares,—ya como Hartzenbusch la acicalen y enojen cual a moza en fiesta; o como Guerra y Orbe, bruñen y saquen lumbre a la plata antigua; o como Alarcón, la den matices árabes; o como Galdós, la hagan llorar, y tener juicio a par que gracia con Valera [13].



Figure 9. A small sample of the diversity of peoples that coexist with the Spanish language in the Spanish-speaking world.

The exercise of imposing an identity through language on a subaltern majority led that majority to transform the character of the hegemonic culture; and the cultural imposition not only transformed the subaltern culture but also

the epistemic principles of the group in power. This is what happened with the Spanish language, religions, myths and everything that constitutes the symbolic universe of the Hispanic American subject. The contents of coloniality present in the Español Moderno books reproduce the ethnocentric vision in the perception of Hispanic America through the learning of the Spanish language. The books, to be good, must be serious.

In the encoding-decoding process, language communicates meanings that are translated into cultural information produced by ideological subjectivity when it is intended to establish inherent characteristics of the Spanish language to the Hispanic American cultural diversity. Having a Spanish-speaking majority does not lead to the homologation of cultural characteristics. This reasoning is only possible because of the manifest and ethnocentric coloniality of the analysis centered on individuality to make it collective.

Understanding the issue of cultural identity is essential to construct a respectful idea of the Hispanic American cultural reality. The current position of the communities of native peoples in Latin America is different from it was twenty years ago. The current indigenous movement that assumes this formerly derogatory expression as "a way of looking at the world and living reality" [14] has achieved the recognition of their rights and promotes radical transformations in the different states with the purpose of reconstituting their own imaginary because aspiring to recognition and acceptance is not only a legal issue, but also to question both the social structures and the pretended unanimity in worldviews. It is to establish legitimacy demands for sociocultural needs, collective identities and civic rights rather than for questions of wealth distribution. In this aspect, the intercultural communication that a language learner seeks is frustrated if he or she establishes, beforehand, a cultural homologation where diversity is not only evident, but also determinant.

Effective cultural information is determined by recognizing the cultural diversity that includes the imaginary, the social organization, the philosophical conception (aspects that condition human behavior) and culture is determinant to constitute the human being as a cognitive subject. It is primary sociocultural information the environmental character, human rights, sustainable development, the multiethnic condition of the states, the autonomy that is presented as a different alternative to the intended homogenization.

Therefore, when one pretends to offer sociocultural information and limits the information to analogous realities, affective and spiritual traits imposed as homogeneous, it results in a failure for the effective appropriation of sociocultural information.

The issue of cultural diversity is a topic in conflict where one works to recognize the multiple ways that human beings must relate to the surrounding world through dissimilar expressions and to deny the legitimacy of these diverse forms and reduce heterogeneity to an apparent homogeneity that only seeks to establish patterns of power from a cultural particularity pretended as superior. [15].

The characteristics, limitations and omissions of the four-volume *Español Moderno* (2014) text serves as an example of how Chinese learners of Spanish language are restricted to an erroneously homogeneous view of this language, in a global context where diversity predominates.

5. Conclusions

A uniform view of Spanish America as a region of Christian society, Spanish-speaking population and Latin culture with peculiar details and touristic landscapes is offered. The shared common history responds to the colonization process resulting from the "Discovery of America" by Christopher Columbus in the 15th century.

This information corresponds to the deficiencies shown by the students in the exercise of thesis writing, which confirms the impact of books in the process of shaping knowledge and the absence of cultural diversity issues. At least the student completes his first training cycle with a distorted idea concerning the Spanish language in Spanish America.

6. Recommendations

The teaching of Spanish, like any other language, constitutes a process of assimilation of knowledge of other sociocultural realities and a gateway to the reality of various human groups, therefore it is recommended that, before offering any statement, materials that corroborate the information should be consulted because the books are tools for learning and their content is not made up of irrefutable elements. This analysis will continue in the next volumes of the *Español Moderno* series and will later be extended to other series of books for learning Spanish as a foreign language. In this way, it will be possible to analyze the concrete deficiencies of the learning materials and find timely solutions where the learning process is constituted at the lowest possible symbolic cost and the most genuine cultural information, since representing the Hispanic American cultural reality in a respectful and accurate way implies decolonizing perception and understanding Hispanic American from Hispanic America and not through colonial filters, ethnocentric analysis and denial of reality.

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