

*Carro, transporta libros or book truck: Navigating a library in English and Spanish*  
Transcript of conversation between Isaac Fierro and Martha Attridge Bufton

**Martha:** I'm Martha Attridge Bufton. I'm the *Open Shelf* editor-in-chief and I'm here with my colleague Isaac Fierro-Marquez and we're having a conversation about navigating library systems in different languages.

**Isaac:** Yes, thank you for having me Martha. Martha has kind to introduce me. My name is Isaac Fierro. I'm a stacks coordinator for the Carleton University library and I have been holding this job for the past four or five years.

**Martha:** So I always think of you as being from Mexico City but being in Ottawa for a long time. But your relationship with Canada goes back a bit longer than that, right?

**Isaac:** Yeah, my story's I guess a little bit different. I started to come to Canada when I was fifteen. My siblings and myself had the opportunity to do ESL during the summer and winter sessions. So essentially whenever we travelled, our parents they always told us, "If you travel you have to study." So in this case we used to come to Canada and take English when we were younger. So the ESL I used to take was in Toronto downtown and in the wintertime it was quite nice because it was Whistler.

**Martha:** How did you end up in Ottawa?

**Isaac:** So Ottawa is an interesting story. So I did used to come Canada quite often but my high school and my vacation used to be in Mexico. But at some point I did different exchanges. Some in Canada, so I did one in Winnipeg, then I did one in Europe, and then I ended up staying in actually in a boarding school in Hamilton. Then I decided, my parents gave me the choice to go back and to take Mexico and take my university there or take it in Canada. So I chose Canada so partially I picked up Carleton back then because granted you know how cold Ottawa was but also it's important I actually liked Ottawa, it looked really nice.

**Martha:** So you end up at Carleton doing your undergrad and that's really where you first started to work in libraries isn't it?

**Isaac:** So yeah, Canada is still where I see where it's a little different. One of my siblings was doing her degree in Mexico so even though it was a high school I attended, so I also knew the university back then so we had a much smaller library than the one Carleton has. I think the set-up is quite different. So yeah, and I to use it quite often, either for study space for getting materials when I was doing my undergrad here at Carleton.

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**Martha:** So what is it like working in your second language?

Yeah, so I think it's interesting. Cause in the beginning I remember when I was doing my undergrad obviously writing in English is quite different right. So writing essays, which is something my program required, cause I did a double major in political science and history, so it was a lot of writing to be done. So in my first year even though I could get away fairly okay speaking the language, writing is quite different. So I came to that mode of writing essays. It took a bit of time getting used to it. And at that time I remember using some of the services the library used to offer, either going to services or even finding materials.

**Martha:** And did you notice big differences or similarities between the libraries that you knew in Mexico versus let's say the Carleton library?

All I knew is very anecdotal from my sister, right? Like though she used go to a business library, so that materials were rather specific which is similar to what they call reserves, right? So they would have preselected materials ready for students by the professors. So even though it was a library in Mexico most of the material was already preselected for a particular course. So most of the students would be free to go in and request the materials. So here, being an open stack library, it's quite different. So it's a large iconic library at Carleton and you have the opportunity to wander around the stacks and get lost, in a good way.

**Martha:** So that was one of the things that you're sort of aware of, sort of more traditional closed stacks system versus an open stacks system. How did it feel to be a native Spanish speaker but nonetheless looking for materials and interacting with materials in English.

**Isaac:** I think that's an excellent question. I think there is some components that are different, right. So some of them they are natural to understand cause obviously I came from, my culture itself naturally speaking was a different type of culture in the way we interact, how we like perceive see me talking to people, the way you talk to people and interact and so on it's quite different than in Canada. Good enough for me was in a setting already in an university setting, so as I was trying to accustom and get used to those interactions we were having in a class setting, at the same time were happening when I was at in the library. So the lingo was different of course so there some specific words that I wouldn't either I didn't know so I would have to understand them. And even the idioms sometimes, right, like even with coworkers and classmates, they were like, I don't really understand and obviously at this point it's been so long in my opinion living in Canada it's like I don't realize they're Canadian idioms until I meet somebody else from another country who also is an English speaker oh, that's, that's a Canadian idiom.

**Martha:** So what's an example of some of the idioms?

**Isaac:** So, let's say for a funny story, I was in Italy and I was on a bus and overhearing other people speaking English usually they are tourist however I was not in a touristic area and I hear somebody saying *toque*. And I say "Oh, that's a Canadian person." So sure enough I ask her and she's going sure and yeah she was Canadian because the other people didn't really understand what she was talking about.

**Martha:** *Toque*, that is sort of quintessentially Canadian isn't it?

**Isaac:** Pretty much, yes

**Martha:** I know we talked about your job cause yours a stacks supervisor and you reached out and you were doing a little bit of research around similar kind of work in Mexico City. So what were you able to find?

**Isaac:** When you were asking me like some of the words right I manage operationally from a physical standpoint and then as a collection. So we use a lot of tools, right? Like from the physical location, the spaces, the tool we use to move materials. A lot of things go into the operation. But how they really called in Spanish, by definition is my mother tongue, it's not very natural cause I didn't really actually realize I didn't know most of these words. So most of them are basic and they translate very well and other ones did not very specific so what I essentially what I did I followed two universities, more than universities, one is a public library in Mexico City and the other one is the National Autonomous University of Mexico. So the approach is rather different as well so something to just keep in mind.

In Mexico we have private and public education so obviously that goes different type of funding, different type of public universities and private universities are for different disciplines. So in the case of the UNAM, which is the largest university in Mexico, actually they have obviously their central in their main campus in Mexico City but they also have libraries across the country. And they operate those libraries, right? So they have a huge network of libraries of their own. They hold over 150 libraries and so on. Really it's just the one institution right because it's public 100%. But it's still for under that. And the other one that I did it was just oh recently within a decade or so it's a public library in Mexico City and which is acclaimed architecturally speaking so it's a beautiful library.

It's a very different approach cause they serve the public, 100% the public. But at the end of the day there were similarities because again they all have materials, they all have book carts, they have stacks and they have patrons and so on.

**Martha:** What did you discover about the jargon, so I'm curious how words used, your vocabulary, how does that translates into Spanish or doesn't?

In most of the cases, it didn't quite translate as clear. Some of them there were very simple choices, like catalogue right? Catalogue it's essentially a catalogue so it translates to catálogo.

Which is very similar just by the root of the word itself. Then there were other things that like compact shelving, so compact shelving would just be estantería compacta so that literally means that it is tiny so that doesn't make a lot of sense. So it translates better to archivo compacto which is like compact archives cause I guess we associated a compact shelving more with archival material. We have our stacks so you have shelves and we also have what we call wires, right? Which are to just hold the books in place or end plates, either way, so we have different systems.

So I am like how to I call those? So those were quite hard to figure what you call them because the libraries themselves in Mexico would call them different. They would call retenedores] which literally means retainer which makes sense because it is more descriptive. But then I ended up finding a supplier of equipment in Mexico and how I wanted to know how they sell because it cause that's potentially the name of the equipment. They call it sujetador de libros de varilla so that would be what we be what we just call wire. It's a wire book library holder. So it's essentially just describing what it actually does rather than just the word, which if we think about it, in English is the same right? A wire it could be anything but when we are talking about it in context, that's exactly what it is.

**Martha:** Well I've never studied Spanish but I did study French for a while and I came away with the impression that often in English we have one word to describe to something, an object, but in French you can have two or three sometimes. It seems the language is much more descriptive. And it sounds as if that might be sometimes what you notice in Spanish as well.

Ah yeah and even of course like within languages, like just within in Spanish, like I at some point I was looking at a university, a public library in Madrid right, so how they would call like a reserve is different how we call it in Mexico cause our languages, even though we can communicate perfectly fine, we have variations. But it is something I agree with you, yes, even in Spanish is similar to French in the sense that the languages tend to be descriptive as to what an item does.

**Martha:** So give me some more examples.

So, high capacity shelving, it's our storage facility, so it would be estantería de alta densidad, so that one translates nicely, but it is describing what it does. So estantería it means stacks so that's best way and estante is just singular for a shelf. Even in Spanish you can see doesn't change the words so much. English changes a lot from stacks to shelf and again we tend to call stacks when they are in libraries but really they are book shelves. In Spanish, you would say estante at home but you wouldn't say in English stacks at home.

**Martha:** Not at all.

**Isaac:** So there is, there are variations even though by definition it's a bookshelf. If anything again its either, it's a library or an archives or something but it's literally storage of material, Book truck is an interesting one. So book cart in Spanish, the word for a cart is carro so in this case we call is carro. The supplier would call it porta libros which is like it carries books. The libraries would call it transporta libros which is a variation of the word but again it is essentially the same thing of describing what this carro is doing right which is transporting books. While in the library we just call it a book cart but we are not saying what the book cart is doing. There is no activity associated to it, they're just two words put together.

**Martha:** Not it's very almost inanimate in that sense. So what was your favourite of all the terms you came up with?

**Isaac:** I liked something that was quite particular. The shelf itself, there are so many variations, right? So of course we have them in English but we tend to refer like just to shelf. So in Spanish in call it estante but very quickly I found that people had all these variations of the shelf, estante de revistas, estante de periodicos], estante de libros, estante vertical or horizontal so all these different degrees of what a shelf is because they use them in different ways or perhaps how they organize the materials. And this is something that perhaps a public library that would have more magazines or different material would probably relate to it but in our particular library we don't tend to have a lot of variations of stacks so it's really generic. Again the particularities of the format and the material it is does determine the work of different libraries right. In our case, because we don't tend to carry a lot of these materials it may also explain why we don't tend to use those shelving, which makes perfect sense.

**Martha:** So just to wrap it up, I remember when we were talking earlier and we were exploring this notion of language and moving from one language to another, I made the assumption that you would know the words in Spanish and you said, "No, no, no, no, no." Tell us a bit more about what it is to come and work in one language and maybe in a way to be disconnected from the other one?

**Isaac:** It even happens to me when I go back home right. So I will go to Mexico and I will just speak the language so I don't an issue communicating but even the idioms and some expression have changed so I find myself hearing either sometimes more English in Mexico, some words we are adopting a little bit faster than others or some idioms have changed in context and I'm like what is asking or even when I am trying to do business in Mexico, it's quite different. So the words that I am used to, let's say when I have a meeting and have to like manage, coordinate, do all these things, I have the words in English in my mind but they don't translate 100 percent of the time in Spanish so I really have to stop and think about or I have to entirely rephrase in order to get my point across. So that happens to me when I go in Spanish but the same thing happens when you

asked me if I knew all these words in Spanish I absolutely was like right I think I know how to call a shelf but I don't know all the other things cause actually I never had, I never been exposed in Mexico to have a book cart so how do I call it? So I really have to review and actually reach out to figure out how to really call these things. And again, even myself, I found very quickly over the surface, variations within different languages in Mexico and even within libraries, public libraries in Spain and Mexico as well just because the language is different.

**Martha:** So maybe jargon isn't such a bad thing.

**Isaac:** No, I think some of it is industry specific as we're figuring out.