

SPEECH BY H. M. THE KING AT MIAMI DADE COLLEGE

“THE SPANISH OF THE UNITED STATES”

Miami

17 September 2015

Thank you very much, Mr. President, for your remarks and for this Presidential Medal, of which I am deeply proud for several reasons: because of the institution granting me this honor, because of where and when I am receiving it and, consequently, because of everything that it means. Thanks to the entire Miami Dade College community for your warm welcome.

Indeed, I am receiving this solemn honor, kindly awarded by one of the most important and prestigious colleges in this country, in a place—our beloved Florida—which has had ties with Spain for more than half a millennium and which is part of the very origin of the United States of America. I am receiving it within the context of our first official visit as The King and Queen of Spain to this great country, and after having met with and exchanged views and concerns with President Obama and with the First Lady. After having talked to many prominent figures in this country about world affairs, and about relations between our two nations in every field.

Two nations which are, on a daily basis, discovering and acknowledging more and more shared affinities, more and more future projects uniting us in the effort to build, together with other friendly nations, a better world—a more secure world, a world with greater solidarity.

Noteworthy among these affinities are those that undoubtedly spring from the history that for centuries made a substantial area of what is today United States territory—from Alaska to Florida and from Canada to Mexico—part of Spain’s dominions. The many expressions of the shared cultural heritage in which Spaniards and Americans can recognize each other all bear witness to the legacy of those centuries, and to the unfolding of many subsequent events. I am referring to the many manifestations of our culture in the broadest sense, and especially to the Spanish language that we use on both shores of the Atlantic and that we share

with over twenty nations worldwide, most of them in this great hemisphere of the Americas.

Indeed, I could use the language in which I am now expressing my thanks, Spanish—or *Castilian*, as it is called in certain regions of Spain and Ibero-America—in more than twenty countries and feel at home in all of them. But it is no less fascinating that the same language can sound so familiar in a country that uses English as its *de facto* national language, even though no language has ever been named “official” nationwide in all of U.S. history.

In the case of Miami Dade College, familiarity with Spanish is more than justified because of this institution’s deep Hispanic roots. For me personally, it is very moving and gratifying to have the opportunity of speaking in Spanish at a college in the United States which is more than half a century old and which has always served the Hispanic community, with a large proportion of students from minority groups. For all these reasons, Miami Dade is a magnificent example of educational service within a community that is proud to call this college its own.

And that is exactly what I feel at having the opportunity to participate in the opening ceremony of the 2015 academic year, thanks to the generosity of Miami Dade’s authorities. Precisely because of the Hispanic origin of many of these authorities, because of the weight of their Hispanic student community, and because of the importance of Hispanic issues in the State of Florida, I would like to share with you some reflections on the situation of the Spanish language in the United States.

With respect and admiration for the English language, today I can feel that Spanish is experienced in the United States as part of its history, but especially as a substantial part of its current situation and a key component of its future identity. This feeling is my personal perception, gleaned from what I have observed about Americans—those who speak Spanish and those who don’t—and about such places as California, New Mexico, Illinois, New York and, of course, Florida, whose statistics on Spanish-speaking communities are well known. But my appraisal is also based on arguments put forward in the debate on the Spanish language and Hispanic identity taking place right now in U.S. society, in the intellectual, political and social arenas.

This debate actually involves diverse issues that require specific responses. One of the most interesting is whether we can talk about the existence of a

Spanish *of* the United States or whether we should treat it as Spanish *in* the United States. Is Spanish an integral part of U.S. reality—and as such the Spanish *of* the United States—or is it a new and adjunct element, as gathered from the expression Spanish *in* the United States?

In March, New York City hosted a meeting of experts, at the “25th Conference on Spanish in the United States”, and their conclusion on this was crystal clear: we must refer to a Spanish *of* the United States, with its own social and linguistic characteristics, because of its past and because of its present—but especially because it is an integral part of the identity of a significant portion of the American people. The Spanish language has never been a visitor, merely passing through the United States, because it belongs to this land, just as it belongs to so many other peoples in the Americas, Africa, Asia and Europe.

This Spanish *of* the United States—of Miami or Los Angeles, of Chicago or Santa Fe—is not a uniform variety, but rather, it includes highly diverse words and expressions, as is the case in any other Spanish-speaking territory. The southern United States is home to an age-old Spanish, successor of the Spanish brought there by Spaniards and Mexicans since the 17th and which has miraculously survived until the present day, as is also the case of the Spanish spoken by the Louisiana islanders, brought over from Spain’s Canary Islands in the 18th century.

And alongside that age-old Spanish, from the late 19th century Spanish started taking root as a result of immigration, chiefly from Puerto Rico, Cuba and Mexico. All of these immigrants interacted continuously among each other and with English-speaking peoples. That is what gave rise to the Spanish of the United States, because its features and traits are not only particular to it, but also give it a unique personality as compared with variants of Spanish spoken elsewhere.

But this debate does not end simply by accepting and acknowledging the fact that the Spanish language belongs to American society. Such reflections also examine the position it holds within the United States. And here, on the face of it, the conclusions seem to be more in agreement. Spanish would seem to be destined to occupy, and to stay on, the margins of this society, far from a center that has been occupied for the last two centuries by English. The place of the English language is, thus, considered the rightful and logical response to American society’s relentless power of assimilation.

However, not all voices are unanimous on this issue. Many sociolinguists speak of a clear shift of Spanish from the periphery towards the center. This shift means that the Hispanic minority is reaching the core of American society, with a higher profile thanks to Hispanics' rising educational level, to the creative vitality of their culture, and to their predominance in different service sectors. Gradually, Hispanics are no longer being considered "peripheral" but "central", and that is also reflected in the use and appreciation of the Spanish language, as well as a growing interest in learning it. Of course, there can be no doubt about the central role of Spanish in places like Florida or California, but the weight of Spanish is also increasing in most of the other states.

This growth is also clear in economic terms. The U.S. Hispanic community, taken on its own, would constitute the world's thirteenth largest economy. Such a figure is obviously being taken out of context, because the Hispanic economy can only be understood as interwoven into the economy of the United States as a whole—nevertheless, the figure speaks for itself. The purchasing power of Hispanics has grown by 461% in the past 25 years, well above the national average or the growth of other booming population groups, such as Asian-Americans. What is known as the "Latino market" has become so important that it demands to be taken into account in the most significant business decisions, including advertising and marketing. This is but one more example of the gradual shift towards the center of all things Hispanic in recent decades.

Having said this, the rightful place that Spanish of the United States—henceforth simply "U.S. Spanish"—should hold not only involves its status within this society, but also its position in the entire Spanish-speaking world. Specialists have pointed out that U.S. Spanish is often perceived as peripheral compared with other varieties of the language, since a central role is granted to those of each Spanish-speaking country—especially those having the highest international profile, such as the Spanish spoken in Mexico, Colombia, Argentina and Spain.

It would seem as if coexistence with English would rob U.S. Spanish of some of its authenticity or legitimacy. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is no longer just a question of appreciating that all varieties of Spanish coexist with other languages in their respective territories, but also of making clear that the more Spanish consolidates its central position in the United States, the more prestige it acquires in the rest of the world. Spanish is getting an international

boost from being a language used in the world's number-one economic power, which leads to greater interest in studying and learning it. At the same time, U.S. Spanish is gaining prestige as the variety belonging to a wide range of Hispanics, because it is used in myriad ways—especially in the media—by Hispanic professionals, whose numbers and qualifications are constantly rising over time.

Finally, within today's important debate about the future of the Hispanic community, a question is being asked forcefully and insistently, a question that troubles Hispanics and non-Hispanics, and whose answer will affect the social future of this great country. The question, naturally, is: What should be the future of the Spanish language in the United States of America? Is Spanish doomed to the assimilation experienced by other languages, such as German, French or Italian? Or, on the contrary, is it destined to become a language used side-by-side with English, as part of a large bilingual community? These are probably not the only two alternatives; however, they at least serve to identify the boundaries of a wide-open social scenario.

It seems obvious that the future of languages used in the United States will depend on what the American people—including their largest minority groups—want for themselves. Be that as it may, any analysis of this situation necessarily indicates that a sector of the population will emerge as protagonists of this uncertain future. I'm thinking here about today's children; I'm thinking here about tomorrow's adults. On the one hand, today's non-Hispanic children, when choosing a second language to study, seem clearly inclined to learn Spanish. But what will happen to Hispanic children, especially third- and fourth-generation Hispanics? Will they know Spanish? Will they still speak it with their families, even after definitively putting down roots in the United States? If we take another look at what the experts say, we can see that the Hispanic question largely lies here: in the language and identity of third- or fourth-generation Hispanics, as well as in what use these generations may find for the Spanish language.

If intergenerational transmission of the language turns out to be a key aspect, then we would need to know which factors facilitate this transmission, and which interrupt it. The studies carried out on this topic, including those published by the Instituto Cervantes Observatory of the Spanish Language in the United States at Harvard University, indicate two essential factors: the use of Spanish within Spanish-speaking families, and its presence at school. If Hispanic families stopped speaking Spanish to their children and grandchildren, if schools marginalized the Spanish language, then its fate would depend exclusively on

shifts in immigration trends, which would not guarantee its future as a language in American society.

The family and the school system are, consequently, the areas demanding the most attention for those who consider that the Spanish language ought to continue, in the long run, as a useful and stable language in the United States. Hispanic families should have reasons to feel proud of keeping Spanish as a language defining their identity, as an enriching part of community life, and of the professional and personal life of each Hispanic individual, coexisting with the English language.

Schools, for their part, would have to comprehend the importance of providing all their students with a language tool having an international scope, such as Spanish, which will undoubtedly have future benefits for their adult lives. Knowing Spanish will favor their professional careers and enable them to more easily identify with Spanish-speaking communities, both inside and outside of the United States. This is why the hundreds of dual and bilingual programs that already exist here are so important, and why they deserve more attention.

We must in any case be aware that the future of the language does not depend solely on its use in face-to-face interaction, but also its presence in the high-tech world. Here, English enjoys a privileged position, thanks to the English-speaking countries that have invested so much in research and development. In this area, Spanish has a major subsidiary presence, thanks above all to the sheer weight of 500 million Spanish speakers, and the growth in their numbers and their improved wellbeing, education, and economic development.

The United States' own Spanish-speaking community is a major consumer of communication technologies: Hispanics are among largest internet users in the United States, while they use their cell phones more to connect to the internet than other major demographic groups. The Spanish language must be present, therefore, in the development of any technology in the United States. Above all, we must make an effort for Spanish to make the leap from a language for consumers to a language involved in creating new technologies, as well as in the training and research carried on at universities.

The time has come to reach some conclusions. I just referred to Spanish as a language tool having an international scope. And the fact is that U.S. Spanish cannot be considered an autonomous variety, exclusively used by a national

community isolated from other peoples sharing a common history, but rather as an expression of an international language, one enriched by an infinite number of idioms and accents, from North and South America, from the Caribbean and Africa, from Europe and the Pacific. The fact that it is simultaneously a single language, but with a multiplicity of voices, is what makes Spanish so rich, and the reason for its high international profile. None of these Spanish voices is one too many; none of them is insignificant. The accents of U.S. Spanish-speakers are just as valid and legitimate as those from Spain or from Chile. No American should stop speaking Spanish because of the peculiarities of their accent—because we are all “peculiar”.

Every one of us has their own accent, learned from our families and where we grew up, and we can all feel proud of it—just as Colombians or Cubans feel proud of theirs, and just as those from Miami or Los Angeles should feel proud of their own accents in Spanish.

Hispanics in the United States have many reasons to feel proud, and one of them is to have the privileged heritage of two global cultures. Next year, we mark the 400th anniversary of the death of Miguel de Cervantes and of William Shakespeare, and I cannot imagine a better tribute to both universal figures than to know and enjoy both their languages.

In 1994, Cuban-American professor Gustavo Pérez-Firmat said that in Miami Spanish there was a word for someone who spoke neither Spanish nor English. If someone who speaks two languages is called “bilingual”, the one who feels comfortable in neither is called “no-lingual”. The idea is that a “no-lingual” is someone who treats their mother tongue like a foreign language, and the foreign tongue like their other language. All of us, together could make it possible for these “no-linguals” to not feel deprived of a cultural heritage, since their situation between two languages gives them access to two infinitely rich worlds: Those of Miguel de Cervantes and of William Shakespeare.

In a long-ago month of May, in 1590, Miguel de Cervantes tried to move to the Americas, the Indies; but in the end, he couldn't. Who knows what would have become of *Don Quixote* if he had. However, Cervantes' masterpiece did travel to the Americas, once it was published in 1605. Its first stops were the lands of Peru and Mexico, but in the end it wound up reaching every corner of the continent.

Cervantes never traveled to the Americas, nor did he have any American descendants, but he did leave us a cultural legacy that belongs to all the world—and most especially, to those of us who speak Spanish, both natives and non-natives. We have all inherited this legacy of Cervantes, which can be expressed in an infinite number of accents, in which we recognize ourselves as heirs to a culture with a splendid past and a bright future.

A culture that the United States and Spain share with more than twenty countries in the Americas and the rest of the world, and which is called to contribute to building an international community that is more integrated and more united, with a greater spirit of plurality and solidarity.

Thank you very much.