People often confuse the words dialect and slang. Linguists sometimes define a dialect as a variant of a language that is still mutually intelligible to speakers of other dialects of that same language. The linguist John McWhorter says, “Dialects are all there is.” That is, that the word language only applies to a dialect that has been chosen for political or social reasons to have the status of language. The dialect of English spoken in California for example, West Coast US English, is easily understood by people speaking Southern US English. Although Scots English is a dialect of English, speakers of American English often miss too many words to understand it well until they have heard it for many hours.

There are many dialects in the Spanish speaking world. The five major dialect areas are:

- Spain
- Caribbean (including Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and the Caribbean coasts of Mexico, Central America, Venezuela and Colombia)
- Mexico and Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panamá)
- Andean countries: Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Perú, Chile, Bolivia
- River Plate Region: Paraguay, Argentina, Uruguay

These areas are further divided by country and then by region. Dialect differences include pronunciation, vocabulary and some slight grammar differences.

If you want to read more on dialects and languages, read the very engaging book The Power of Babel by John McWhorter.

Read more about Spanish dialects and varieties.

Idioma Español is in Spanish and has many other interesting links.

Slang is a subset of vocabulary and grammar used by a select group of people. There is surfer slang, rap slang, doctor slang, pickpocket slang, teenager slang, prison slang, Hollywood slang and so on. Slang varies greatly from region to region and changes frequently. Older people use less slang than younger people. Some slang words like “cool” go in and out of fashion over 80 plus years. Others, like “nifty” or “rad” come, and then are gone forever. Slang words usually start in lower socio-economic classes and move upward. All languages have and use slang terms.

There are many websites devoted to slang from various Spanish speaking countries. A particularly good website is Jergas Hispanas. This site is a very complete and ever-changing dictionary of slang and colloquialisms by country. It is free but does require you to register and use a password. If you want to read more on slang from Spanish speaking countries go to any search engine and type in the words Mexican (or Cuban, Argentinean, Spanish etc.) slang or vocabulario mexicano (or cubano, argentino, español etc.)

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