

WHAT THE TOP SPANISH WORDS CAN TEACH US

or, Wiktionary Solves the Targeted/Non-Targeted Debate... Mostly

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Source: http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Wiktionary:Frequency_lists/Spanish1000

This is an analysis of the top 505 words on the Wiktionary word frequency list for Spanish. The Wiktionary lists are compiled by analyzing the most common words from thousands of movie and television show subtitles. The corpus size is millions upon millions of words and growing weekly as more subtitles are added and analyzed by the program. The Wiktionary list may be a close approximation to actual spoken language. Is it a perfect representation of spoken language? Nope. But it may be one of the best we have available. Screen writers, after all, have to write scripts that sound at least somewhat natural to viewers. Why 505 words? The number is arbitrary, but I would be pleased if my students could understand and use all of these top 505 words well by level 3 or 4. Analyzing the top 800 or 2,000 words might give a clearer picture of actual language use, but I am willing to bet that 505 comes close.

The Wiktionary list is different than other word frequency lists because it contains ALL forms of words, including the conjugated forms of verbs, which can sound very different to novices. The Wiktionary analysis by conjugations can help language teachers with insights into how language is actually used. It can also help us to relax and use natural language with our students. This is an analysis of the verbs used in the top 505 words on the list.

The Vocabulary Shelters Itself

Verbs play an outsized role in the most frequently used words on the Wiktionary list, but there is not a lot of variety among them. In the top 505 words on Wiktionary there are just 51 different verbs, but these verbs appear in many different forms. Notice the similarities between the top 12 verbs on these two lists:

<u>Wiktionary Top 12 Verbs:</u>			<u>Frequency Dictionary of Spanish (Mark Davies) Top 12 Verbs:</u>		
hacer	estar	ver	ser	hacer	ver
ir	haber	deber	haber	poder	dar
ser	poder	saber	estar	decir	saber
decir	tener	querer	tener	ir	querer

Among the most-used words on this and other frequency lists the same verbs keep showing up. The naturally occurring vocabulary seems to be sheltering itself.

The Grammar Shelters Itself

Specific forms of the top 8 verbs alone account for 86/505 words on the Wiktionary list (17%); the top 20 verbs, 137/505 (27%). In all, **the various conjugations of verbs account for 174 of the 505 most frequently used words in Spanish (34%).**

This limited set of verbs appear in many different grammatical forms, but some forms are much more common. Here is the breakdown of tenses and moods among those most frequently used verbs:

present	91 (52% of verbs)	present subjunctive	8 (5%)	past subjunctive	3 (1.7%)
infinitive	29 (16%)	past participle	6 (3.4%)	future	2 (1.1%)
preterit	15 (9%)	conditional	5 (2.8%)	present participle	2 (1.1%)
imperfect	9 (6%)	imperative	4 (2.2%)		

Are we using these verb forms proportionally and appropriately with our students?
 Can we extrapolate to all of the language based on the top 505 words on the list?

If the Wiktionary sample size were small it would be more suspect, but the list is based on such an immense corpus that it may give a The implications for our teaching are that if we want our students to develop fluency, we need use natural language and allow the process of language use to focus on the top verbs. Susan Gross always said, **“Shelter vocabulary, not grammar.”** This list indicates that the idea of sheltering vocabulary, but not grammar, occurs naturally. On it we see all kinds of grammar in the form of conjugations, but the vocabulary is limited. If we use natural language we will automatically shelter vocabulary but not grammar. Natural language use will give students the vocabulary they need (the highest frequency words) as well as the grammatical forms (the most used verb conjugations) that students most need to learn.

It takes care of itself. Given enough time and comprehended input, students will acquire what they need to acquire. We can only screw it up if we overthink the process and focus too much on one aspect of language to the neglect of natural language use and communication.

Another Susie Gross quote sums up the problem: **“Just talk to your kids.”**

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|--|---|--|---|
| <p>1. Hacer (14)
 hacer
 hace
 hecho
 haciendo
 haces
 hacerlo
 hizo
 hice
 haré
 hiciste
 hago
 hagas
 haga
 hacen</p> | <p>vamos
 fue
 voy
 va
 ir
 vas
 fuera
 van
 vaya
 iba
 vete
 fui
 fueron</p> | <p>ser
 son
 era
 eres
 sea
 fuera
 será
 sido
 somos
 sería
 eran</p> | <p>digo
 dicho
 dijiste
 dices
 dicen
 dime</p> |
| <p>2. Ir (13)</p> | <p>3. Ser (13)
 es
 soy</p> | <p>4. Decir (10)
 decir
 dijo
 dije
 dice</p> | <p>5. Estar (10)
 está
 estoy
 estás
 estaba
 están
 estar
 estamos
 estado
 estabas</p> |

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|---|--|--|--|
| <p>esté</p> <p>6. Haber (10)</p> <p>hay
ha
he
has
han
había
haber
hemos
haya
hubiera</p> <p>7. Poder (8)</p> <p>puedo
puede
puedes
podemos
podría
pueden
poder
pueda</p> <p>8. Tener (8)</p> <p>tengo
tiene
tienes
tenemos
tener
tenía
tienen
tuve</p> <p>9. Ver (7)</p> <p>ver
ven
visto
ve
veo
ves
vi</p> | <p>10. Deber (6)</p> <p>debe
debo
debería
debes
debemos
deberías</p> <p>11. Saber (6)</p> <p>sé
sabes
sabe
saber
sabía
saben</p> <p>12. Querer (5)</p> <p>quiero
quieres
quiere
quería
quieren</p> <p>13. Creer (4)</p> <p>creo
crees
cree
creer</p> <p>14. Necesitar (4)</p> <p>necesitamos
necesita
necesitas
necesito</p> <p>15. Pasar (4)</p> <p>pasó
pasa
pasar
paso</p> <p>16. Venir (4)</p> <p>viene
venir</p> | <p>venga
vino</p> <p>17. Dar (3)</p> <p>da
dame
dar</p> <p>18. Dejar (3)</p> <p>deja
déjame
dejar</p> <p>19. Hablar (3)</p> <p>hablar
hablando
habla</p> <p>20. Esperar (2)</p> <p>espera
espero</p> <p>21. Gustar (2)</p> <p>gusta
gustaría</p> <p>22. Morir (2)</p> <p>muerto
morir</p> <p>23. Pensar (2)</p> <p>pensé
pensar</p> <p>24. Tomar (2)</p> <p>toma
tomar</p> <p>25. Vivir (2)</p> <p>vivir
vivo</p> <p>26. Amar (1)</p> <p>amo</p> | <p>27. Ayudar (1)</p> <p>ayuda</p> <p>28. Comer (1)</p> <p>comer</p> <p>29. Conocer (1)</p> <p>conozco</p> <p>30. Contar (1)</p> <p>cuenta</p> <p>31. Encontrar (1)</p> <p>encontrar</p> <p>32. Entender (1)</p> <p>entiendo</p> <p>33. Entrar (1)</p> <p>entrar</p> <p>34. Escuchar (1)</p> <p>escucha</p> <p>35. Importar (1)</p> <p>importa</p> <p>36. Llamar (1)</p> <p>llama</p> <p>37. Llegar (1)</p> <p>llegar</p> <p>38. Mirar (1)</p> <p>mira</p> <p>39. Matar (1)</p> <p>matar</p> <p>40. Oír</p> <p>oye</p> <p>41. Parecer</p> <p>parece</p> |
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42. **Preocupar**
preocupes

43. **Quedar (1)**
queda

44. **Salir (1)**
salir

45. **Seguir (1)**
sigue

46. **Sentir (1)**
siento

47. **Significar (1)**

significa

48. **Suponer (1)**
supongo

49. **Trabajar (1)**
trabajar

50. **Valer (1)**
vale

51. **Volver (1)**
volver