

# Great English Mistakes

made by Spanish-speakers

– with a few Catalan specials –

**Peter Harvey**

Illustrations by  
*Alison Litherland*

Lavengro Books



... the wind on the heath ...

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## **introduction**

We learn from our mistakes and that is a good thing. But if language mistakes are not corrected they become a habitual way of speaking; we learn them and make them part of our normal way of speaking instead of learning from them and correcting them. Correcting mistakes is a very important part of language teaching, but it is one that is very often not given the importance that it is due to it.

In 24 years of teaching in Spain I have heard many mistakes made by people speaking English, and I have noticed that it is a long time now since I heard an original one. All Spanish-speakers make the same mistakes in grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation – and this is not really very surprising. I say this to reassure you; there is nothing peculiar about you and your mistakes in English. Everyone's problems are the same when it comes to learning English!

Not all mistakes are the same, though. Some are very important while others are comparatively trivial, though teachers marking students' work do not always recognise this difference. In this book I have collected the most important (and sometimes amusing) mistakes that I have heard and read during my years of teaching and examining.

## **acknowledgements**

I cannot possibly thank individually all the hundreds of students and examination candidates who have contributed the material for this book. But my thanks to them are sincere, as is my respect for the large amount of hard work that they do to learn the English language. I studied modern languages at university and have continued studying languages since then. I know from my own experience how difficult it is to learn a foreign language, and how much work is involved.

I must thank *Alison Litherland* for the illustrations and for her comments on the text; her artistic work can be seen on <http://www.alisonlitherland.com>. I am also grateful to *Joan Quintana* for the cover. My wife *Jane Harvey* read the book and made a number of useful comments and suggestions, as did *Mariano Castellblanque Ramiro*, *Monica Masotti* and *Miquel Strubell i Trueta*. The example for *puntos suspensivos* (three dots) is taken from the *Diccionario panhispánico de dudas*, RAE.

Part of this book was written during weekends spent in Queens' College Cambridge, and I thank the College for its hospitality to an old member.

Errare humanum est.  
(To make mistakes is human.)  
*Seneca*

A man who never made a mistake never made anything.  
*David Gemmell*

Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because  
he could do only a little.  
*Edmund Burke*

A well-adjusted person is one who makes the same mistake twice  
without getting nervous.  
*Alexander Hamilton*

The only real mistake is the one from which we learn nothing.  
*John Powell*

A smart man makes a mistake, learns from it, and never makes that  
mistake again. But a wise man finds a smart man and learns from  
him how to avoid the mistake altogether.  
*Roy H. Williams*



When the cowboy drew his gun, did he use charcoal or crayons?

# A

## A

The name of this letter is pronounced /ei/, the sound that you hear in *came* and *rain*.

See E; I.

### **a and an**

Remember, this is a phonetic rule to make the pronunciation easier. We say *a* before a consonant and *an* before a vowel – but it depends on the pronunciation, not on the spelling. So we say *a European country* and *a university* because they begin with /ju/, but *an hour* and *an honest man* because these words have a silent *H*. Something similar is found in Spanish when we say *e hijos* and *alemán u holandés*.

### **abandon**

In English *abandon* means to leave a thing or a place for ever. Remote villages in the mountains have been abandoned and we see abandoned cars in the streets. When you finish work for the day you *leave* your office.

### **academy**

The place that you go to for your English language classes might call itself the *Academy* but these places are generally known in English as *language schools*. Also, all children go to a *school* in English but it might be a *colegio*, *escuela* or *INSTITUTO* in Spanish.

### **accept**

You can *accept an invitation to do something* or you can *AGREE to do something* but you do not *accept to do something*. *Accept* is transitive and must have a noun object.

### **action**

Companies have *shares* that are owned by *shareholders*; this is because the ownership of the company is shared (*repartido*)

proportionally among the people who have contributed the capital. An *action* is something that you do: *acción* or *actuación*.

## **actual**

This is a classic false friend. It means *real*. You can say that José is the *current* chairman of the chess club because he has the job this year. And you can say that Teresa, who is the secretary of the club, *actually* runs things.

The adjective *actual* and the adverb *actually* have no connection with time. *Actually* actually means *really*.

## **age**

*My daughter has six months. I have thirty years old.* These are typical mistakes. Ages are said with *be* + *number* – we do **not** use *have*. You can say *I am thirty* or *I am thirty years old* (but not *I am thirty years*). The *years old* isn't necessary, because it's obvious really! However, with other units we always say, for example, *My daughter is six weeks / months old*. Also, with things other than people we always say the *years old*: *This house is 150 years old. My car is six years old*.

## **agony**

This is not necessarily associated with death. It is commonly used to describe severe pain: *I've got toothache. I've been in agony all week*. An *agonising decision* is one that is extremely difficult and painful to take.

## **agree**

*I agree with you*, not *I am agree with you*. The negative form is *I don't agree with you* or *I disagree with you*.

See ACCEPT.

## **Algeria**

The *l* and the *r* are the opposite way round in English from Spanish. This is done to make life more interesting. The English name of the country's capital is *Algiers*.

See CROCODILE.

## **all**

*All* is like an adjective: *all the time, all the students*. When you need a pronoun, use *everyone/body* or *everything*: *Everyone was happy; I told everybody; You have everything you need*.

In *todo tipo de ...* the *tipo* is singular but in English it is *all kinds of ...* with a plural *kinds*.

## **all the world**

Shakespeare said *All the world's a stage* and in Spanish that is *Todo el mundo es un escenario* (As You Like It / Como gustéis 2,7). So, if you say *all the world*, you are saying *el mundo entero* or *todo el planeta*. What you probably want to say is *everyone* or *everybody* (there is no difference between these two words) as in *Everyone knows that* or *Everybody got a present*.

## **America**

Hmm. America is that continent on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, or the *pond (charco)* as it is sometimes called. Britain got the big bit in the north and Spain got most of the thin bit in the middle and of the big bit in the south. That historical fact has greatly affected how the two countries see the continent. In English we really do say *American* to refer to the USA, *the American economy* and so on, but you can also say *the US economy*, which is like *estadounidense* or *norteamericano*. But there is another problem, because in English *North America* naturally includes Canada – and it's not a good idea to tell a Canadian that he is responsible for *la política norteamericana* when you mean *estadounidense*. Even Mexico is in the North American Free Trade Area. Oh, and if you talk about the *southern cone* in English, no-one will have any idea of what you mean; if you want to talk about Argentina and Chile you should say so.

## **angina**

This is something that can lead to real confusion. If you tell an English-speaker that you are suffering from *anginas*, don't be surprised if they rush to the phone to call an ambulance. In English

angina **only** means *angina de pecho* and if you use it to say that you have a bad sore throat people will get a very wrong impression and think that you are about to have a heart attack. But there's another mistake waiting to trap you here: you can say that you have a sore *throat* or a *pain in your throat* – but a *pain in the neck* is *un rollo!*

## angry

*I'm angry. I haven't eaten all day.* I wonder who or what has prevented you from eating. No! You are *hungry* – *ienes hambre*. You might be *angry* – *enfadada* too but that is something different. Note that the words are pronounced differently: /'æŋɡrɪ/ and /'hʌŋɡrɪ/. Remember – **hungry** and **hambre** both have *h*.

## another

There is terrible confusion here. So many people say things like *In Spain and in another countries*. *Another* is simply the two words *an other* written together, so in the plural we just have *other countries*. Another problem in the singular is that for some strange reason the Spanish article *un/a* disappears before *otro*: *¿Quieres un café? ¿Quieres otro café?* But in English *other* is just another adjective: *Do you want a coffee? Do you want another (an other) coffee?*

## answer

The *w* is not pronounced. It is one of those SILENT LETTERS that make the English language so interesting for people who are learning it.

## any

The *any* words are used in negative sentences but they are **not** negative themselves. *No vi nada* can be *I saw nothing* (positive verb and negated object) or *I didn't see anything* (negated verb and positive object). It can't be *I didn't see nothing* because in English the two negatives cancel each other as they do in mathematics; they do not reinforce each other as they do in Spanish and other languages.

When *any* is used outside negative sentences, it means *cualquiera*. So, *Anybody will help you* is *Cualquiera te ayudará* but *Nobody will help you* is *Nadie te ayudará*. They are exactly opposite in meaning.

## aperitivo

That *aperitivo* with cava and olives and little pastries and biscuits and cakes must surely be an *aperitif* in English. Well no, it isn't really. An *aperitif* is just the drink that you might have before dinner, though this custom is not so usual in Spain. The food that comes with the cava is called *canapés* if they are savoury (*salado*) and *petits fours* if they are sweet. These are French names and pronounced /'kænəpeɪ/ and /,pəti 'fʊ:r/ respectively. Less formally they are called *nibbles* because *nibble* means *mordisquear*, which is what you do with a *pica-pica*.

See COCKTAIL.

## apologise

You apologise when you have done something wrong that has been bad for another person; it is *pedir perdón*, *disculpase*. Do not say, as someone once said to me, *I apologise for your father's death*. That should be *I was sorry to hear of your father's death*.



## arbitro

What do you call the man who is in charge of a football match (assuming you don't want to call him something very insulting)? He is the *referee*; in cricket and tennis and some other sports this person is called an *umpire*. An *arbitrator* is a person who decides some legal disputes.

## arrive

When you arrive, you are there, you have finished travelling, so we use a preposition of place not movement. You arrive **at** the station or **in** Madrid. You have driven **to** the station and you have flown **to** Madrid, but your arrival is the end of the journey. *At* and *in* are the

commonest prepositions with *arrive*; some others are possible depending on the context. But *arrive to* is never possible.

### **attic**

An *ático* is a pleasant place to live in, with fresh air and a wonderful view over the city. An *attic* is not the same thing at all. It is the empty space inside the roof of a British house. It is not designed for living in and it would be very unpleasant. It is used for storage of things that are used occasionally, holiday suitcases and Christmas decorations for example, and no-one wants to live in an *altillo* or a *desván*. If your flat is an *ático*, you can say that you live in a *penthouse* – yes, the name of the magazine that reflects the luxurious lifestyle of people who live in penthouses in New York.

Strangely, *loft* is more or less a synonym of *attic* but it is now a very fashionable name for a large space that has been converted for living in. It is used in Spanish with this meaning.