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¡Alerta! Variations in Spanish dialects complicate emergency messaging

Meteorologists call to standardize Spanish advisory terms for weather-related emergencies



A truck passes crashing waves as Hurricane Ike approaches Galveston, Tex., in September 2008. (David J. Phillip/AP)

By **Kay Nolan**

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Translating emergency information from English to Spanish is trickier than it appears. Federal and local emergency authorities, meteorologists and the National Weather Service (NWS) are expanding efforts to communicate information in Spanish as lifethreatening events, including tornadoes, hurricanes and wildfires, increasingly occur in regions across the United States with large numbers of Spanish-speaking residents.

Communication is complicated, however, due to important variations among different Spanish dialects. For decades, much of the official weather information prepared in Spanish has come from Puerto Rico, where the NWS has a major office; many Spanish-speaking meteorologists have also attended the Atmospheric Sciences and Meteorology Program at the University of Puerto Rico. The problem, however, is that many U.S. residents speak different Spanish dialects, depending on their countries of origin.

Meteorologist Joseph Enrique Trujillo-Falcón is helping lead a collaboration among the

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, NWS and the American Meteorological Society to create a dictionary of terms that are not only accurate in Spanish but also, more importantly, convey the appropriate seriousness of a situation. “It’s been something of a rally cry among a lot of bilingual meteorologists,” said Trujillo-Falcón, a graduate research assistant at the Cooperative Institute for Mesoscale Meteorological Studies in Oklahoma. “It’s like, we know it, but we just haven’t been able to communicate it to the rest of our enterprise — but now people are listening. Our next step is to make sure we get a survey of the American audience, and we understand what words best convey the urgency.”

For instance, English-speaking Americans can confuse a “watch,” where conditions are right for a severe storm or tornado, with a “warning,” which means severe weather has already formed.

But it is even more confusing in Spanish. One Spanish word for “watch” is “vigilancia.” “Alerta” means “look out,” whereas “warning” in Spanish is “aviso.” For some Spanish speakers though, “aviso” does not convey an urgent warning requiring action. To add to the confusion, some dictionaries translate “warning” to “alerta,” says Orlando Bermúdez, a native of Puerto Rico and a program leader with the NWS’s Multimedia Assistance in Spanish team. Strictly translated, “alerta” means “look out.” For Mexicans, Bermúdez says, “alerta” might sound like “Be on the lookout,” not “Take action now.”



The National Weather Service and Federal Emergency Management Agency use different Spanish words for similar advisories. (NWS/FEMA; adapted by Joseph Enrique Trujillo-Falcón)

For now, the NWS continues to use “aviso” for a serious “warning” but uses the word “vigilancia” to indicate a “watch.” The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), on the other hand, uses “amenaza” for watch and “advertencia” for warning. While these terms are used by national agencies, local bilingual meteorologists often choose different words based on their nearby communities.

One meteorologist conducted her own survey on which warnings connect with her audience — and her findings contradict the NWS’s current usage.

Nelly Carreño, who is of Mexican descent, works for Univision Channel 23 in Dallas, where the majority of Spanish-speaking viewers are also Mexican.

“In a survey of 500 of my viewers, I gave a choice of several words to announce a tornado and asked viewers to rank in them in urgency. ‘Aviso’ came in last,” Carreño said. “In Mexico, ‘aviso’ is more like, ‘Don’t step in that puddle,’ not ‘A tornado is coming!’ ”

John Morales, a meteorologist in South Florida, praises Trujillo-Falcón’s call to standardize Spanish terms. Morales grew up in Puerto Rico but works in a state where viewers might be from Cuba or countries in Central and South America.

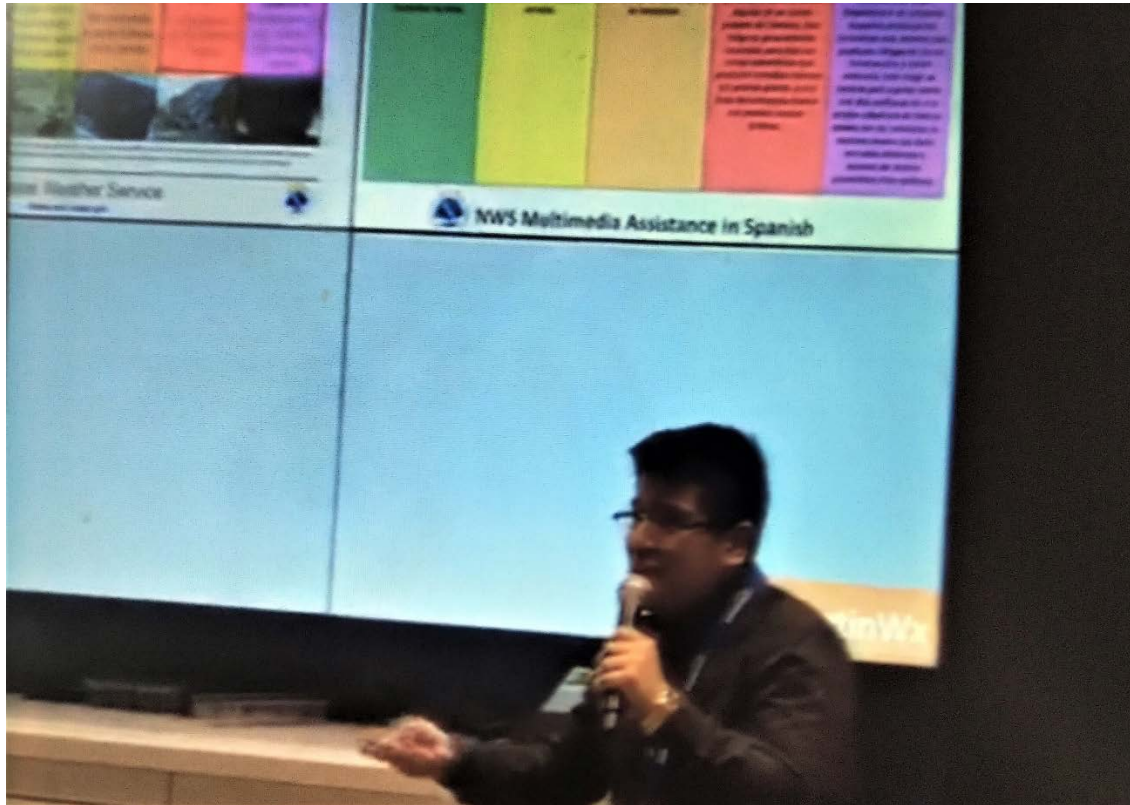
“The term for ‘storm surge’ in Cuba is ‘ras de mar,’ ” says Morales, “but in Puerto Rico, it’s ‘marejada ciclónica’ and in other places, ‘marea de tormenta.’ ” Morales prefers to use “vigilancia” to mean “watch,” as his experience is that “alerta” and “aviso” are simply too similar for many viewers to remember the difference.

Irene Sans, a meteorologist who is originally from Venezuela but grew up in South Florida, says it is important to know a region’s audience. She worked in Boston, Houston, Orlando and Miami for Spanish-language TV stations Univision and Telemundo. She now works for Weather & Radar, a website that publishes weather information for more than 33 countries in 28 languages.

“We have different words, different slang,” she says of various Spanish speakers. “The accent is different, as well as the pace,” Sans said. Venezuelans speak very fast, for example, she says. “I had to slow down a lot when I was forecasting for Texas, where many viewers are Mexican. When I was in Miami, I could speak faster, because most of my viewers were Cuban or Puerto Rican or Venezuelan or Colombian, and they could keep up with me.”

Luis Carrera, who was a meteorologist during the early 1990s in his native Chile before being recruited by the Weather Channel, now works at Telemundo in Miami. He has a funny, albeit embarrassing, tale of miscommunication in Spanish that occurred when he worked at a Dallas Telemundo station.

“The Spanish word for wind is ‘viento’ and ‘windy’ is ‘ventoso,’ ” said Carrera. But what he didn’t know was that among Mexicans, “ventoso” is slang for flatulence. “I meant to say it would be a windy day — I couldn’t understand why everyone started to laugh,” he said.



Above: Joseph Enrique Trujillo-Falcón discusses the differences among Spanish terms used in weather-related emergencies.

Trujillo-Falcón published a paper on the matter in the *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*, along with fellow authors Bermúdez, Krizia Negrón-Hernández, John Lipski, Elizabeth Leitman and Kodi Berry. It advocates ongoing research: “As the language continues to evolve as a result of new Spanish-speaking populations immigrating to the U.S., surveys on hazardous weather terminology in Spanish should be conducted at regular intervals, so that meteorologists and language experts alike are equipped with the best tools forward.”

Bermúdez was part of a team that, two years ago, created a library of 360-character Spanish messages for use by FEMA and the Federal Communications Commission in emergency alerts. Trujillo-Falcón was also part of a team that added a Spanish glossary to the American Meteorological Society’s webpage.



Orlando Bermúdez created a library of Spanish messages for use by government agencies for emergency alerts. ((Orlando Bermúdez))

The NWS is experimenting with automatic translation software to provide weather information in Spanish and other languages spoken in the United States. But there can be problems with that, too.

Otto Padron, a radio executive in California of Cuban descent, notes that the straightforward Spanish translation of a “torrential storm” would be “lluvia torrencial.” But Padron says that to him, that sounds like a gentle rain, whereas the Spanish word “aguacero” would, in his mind, indicate a strong downpour.

“We cannot just use Google Translate,” says the NWS’s Negrón-Hernández. “I’m from Puerto Rico, but even there, different regions use different words. We need to step back and use simple, basic Spanish. Every translation we do, we must make sure it will be understood by everybody.”

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