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How Do Comics Artists Create Sound Effects in Spanish and English?

Frank Bramlett

University of Nebraska at Omaha, fbramlett@unomaha.edu

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How Do Comics Artists Create Sound Effects in Spanish and English?

In 2009, I happened upon a one-shot Spider-Man & Human Torch story. Side-by-side on the rack at my local comic book store were an English-language version and a Spanish-language version, both of which were called *¡Bahía de los Muertos!* (literally *Bay of the Dead*). The Spanish version was also marked “Edición Boricua en Español,” meaning that it was the Puerto Rican edition. I’ve included two images, below. The one on the left is from the Spanish version and the one on the right is from the English. In panel 1, Johnny is getting hit by a monster. In panel 2, Spider-Man is driving the flying car and asks Johnny if he’s okay. In panel 3, Johnny goes supernova to help defeat the monster. Both of these images are equivalent except for the linguistic text.



https://pencilpanelpage.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/spidey_torch_images.jpg

In panel 1, the sound of the monster’s tentacle striking Johnny is English <THWAP> but Spanish <FUAP>. Writer Tom Beland and artist Juan Doe have used sounds that are similar but not exactly the same. English <THWAP> shows two basic differences from Spanish <FUAP>. First, word-initial <TH> stands in for word-initial <F>, and though they look remarkably different, they are very similar phonetically.

In phonetics, <TH> is described as a voiceless interdental fricative. ‘Voiceless’ means that the vocal cords don’t vibrate during production of the sound. ‘Interdental’ means that the tongue protrudes between the teeth, and ‘fricative’ indicates a ‘hissing’ flow of air passing over the tongue, through

the teeth, and out the mouth. Similarly, <F> is described as a voiceless fricative. But <F> is labiodental rather than interdental, meaning that the tongue is contained behind the teeth (it doesn't protrude). Specifically, <F> is made when the top teeth are placed on the bottom lip and the speaker forces air through that space. Again, the 'hissing' sound is characteristic of all fricatives.

The other notable difference in panel 1 is that the value of <A> in English <THWAP> differentiates it from the <A> in Spanish <FUAP>. For most US English speakers, <THWAP> rhymes with <CAP> and shares the same vowel as <HAT> and <LACK> and <STAND>. The value of Spanish <A> is slightly different, sounding more similar to English <FATHER> or <POT>.

A greater difference in rendering sound effect is noticeable in panel 3. The Spanish <FWAAASH> has a vowel like English <FATHER> and this is an elongated <A>, like we would say when wrestling with a tongue depressor in the doctor's office. The English <FWOOOSH>, though it shares the same initial consonant cluster <FW>, contains a very different vowel as its core sound. An English-speaking reader knows that the vowel sound in <FWOOOSH> rhymes with the vowel sound in <FOOD> and other similar sound effects like <SWOOSH> or <WHOOSH>. But a Spanish-speaking reader might make the vowel in <FWOOOSH> sound like the <O> in <OCEAN>. (Admittedly, for some English speakers, the vowel sound in words like <SWOOSH> might rhyme with the vowel in <COOK> rather than <FOOD>, but this is a minor detail and doesn't really affect the Spanish-English comparison.)

Spanish <FWAAASH> probably sounds like English <WASH>. However, if the rules for <THWAP/FUAP> in panel 1 are applied to the effects in panel 3, then English <FWOOOSH> would probably be spelled as Spanish <FUUUUSH>. The problem is that Spanish <FUUUUSH> wouldn't have a sound like English <FW>. Instead, the vowel <U> would be elongated, sounding much like the English word <FOOD>. Or <FOOOOD> if we're looking for an iconic spelling.

The writer and artist, then, compensate by making two spelling changes. Instead of <FU> as in <FUAP>, they use <FW>. Even though the <FU> and the <FW> are different spellings, they are similar pronunciations. Further, the Spanish <FWAAASH> has an <A> vowel and the English version has an <O> vowel. The sound effects, then, sound the same at the beginning but sound very different in the center, and they end up with an <SH> combination at the end of the word.

Another way of looking at it is to say that in the Spanish version, the sound effect in panel 1 <FUAP> and the sound effect in panel 3 <FWAAASH> are most likely pronounced very similarly, with the exception of the end of the words. But the rules for spelling the consonant clusters and the vowels are problematic, and the writers seem to use various strategies to make the sound effects work.

What remains unclear for me is that typically Spanish doesn't spell words with <SH>, so do Spanish-speaking comic book readers know how the <SH> sounds? If so, how do they know? Is it a general familiarity with English-language comic book conventions? Further, would an English-speaking comic book reader know that the Spanish word <FWAAASH> probably does not rhyme with <FLASH>?

I think the writer & artist here are trying to accommodate audiences with two different linguistic codes, but their spelling choices here demonstrate that the phonological rules of Spanish and English sound effects vary somewhat. This means that even though the images of the comic are identical, the linguistic codes have to be handled with care so as to respect and accommodate readers' linguistic resources.

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About Frank Bramlett

Until June 2014, I am a visiting lecturer in the English Department at Stockholm University, where I offer seminars in Sociolinguistics; Language and Gender; and Language and Comics; among others. For Fall 2014, I will return to the English Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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