

A New  
Reference  
Grammar  
of Modern  
*Spanish*

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THIRD EDITION

(d) *Entonces*, as well as meaning 'then' in the sense of 'just after', is much used to introduce a conclusion:

¿Te gusto entonces? (G. Cabrera Infante, Cuba, dialogue)

Entonces, ¿estamos de acuerdo?  
*Entonces, no puedo sino concluir que usted es el culpable*  
 Do you like me, then?  
 So, are we in agreement?  
 In that case, I can only conclude that you are the guilty person

(e) *Pues* is discussed elsewhere, and it can mean 'since' in literary language; see 33.5.3. It is constantly used in colloquial language to introduce conclusions:

—No me gusta el color. —Pues cámbialo.  
 Pues eso mismo te iba a decir  
 'I don't like the color (of it)'. 'Then change it.'  
 That's just what I was going to tell you

### 33.11.11 Agreement

There are numerous ways of agreeing with the previous information or of asserting something as self-evident.

(a) *Claro* is probably the most common, and is found in all styles, although it is slightly colloquial:

*Claro, no me avisaste con tiempo, no pude ir*  
*Claro que si no quieres venir, no vengas*  
*Claro está que no quiero presionar a nadie*  
 Of course, you didn't warn me in time: I couldn't go  
 Obviously if you don't want to come, don't come  
 It's obvious I don't want to put pressure on anyone

Sometimes it makes *sí* 'yes' unnecessary:

—¿Puedo pasar unos días en tu casa?  
 —Hombre, claro, cuando quieras  
 'Can I stay a few days with you?' 'Yes, of course, any time you want'

*Está claro* (Latin America *es claro*) is discussed in the note to 29.2.5.

(b) *Desde luego* means 'of course' and is in daily use, at least in Spain:

*Desde luego, si quieres entrar tendrás que pagar*  
 Obviously, if you want to go in you'll have to pay

(c) *En efecto* and *efectivamente* both signify agreement with what has preceded:

*En efecto/Efectivamente todos eslaban de acuerdo conmigo*  
 —Bueno, estamos fastidiados.  
 —Efectivamente/En efecto  
 They were indeed all in agreement with me  
 'Well, we've had it/we're in trouble.'  
 'You're right'

(d) *Ya* has many uses, listed at 31.7.1. It is often used to indicate agreement with the previous statement, although uttered sarcastically it can mean the exact opposite:

—Es que hay que darle un nombre al fichero antes de guardarlo. —Ya  
 —Es que soy más inteligente que tú —Ya, ya ... 'I'm smarter than you' 'Yeah, sure ...'

(e) *De verdad* insists on the truth of a statement, rather like *en serio* 'seriously':

*De verdad te lo digo otra vez, no me mires*

True, really, once more, don't look at me

# 34

## Prepositions

Prepositional usage is more subject than other areas of syntax to the arbitrariness of linguistic change, and the whole subject is plagued with quibbles and doubts. In this chapter prepositions are treated in alphabetical order and special emphasis has been given to aspects of prepositional usage likely to be unfamiliar to English speakers.

<i>a</i> 'to', 'at' 34.1	<i>contra</i> 'against' 34.6	<i>hacia</i> 'towards' 34.11	<i>sin</i> 'without' 34.16
<i>ante, delante de</i> 'in front of', 'faced with' 34.2	<i>de</i> 'of', 'from' 34.7	<i>hasta</i> 'until', 'as far as' 34.12	<i>sobre</i> 'over', 'on', 'about' 34.17
<i>bajo, debajo de</i> 'beneath', 'underneath' 34.3	<i>durante</i> 'during' 34.8	<i>mediante</i> 'by means of' 34.13	<i>tras, detrás de</i> 'after', 'behind' 34.18
<i>cabe</i> (archaic) 'next to' 34.4	<i>en</i> 'in', 'on', 'at' 34.9	<i>para</i> and <i>por</i> 'for', 'because of', etc. 34.14	
<i>con</i> 'with' 34.5	<i>entre</i> 'between', 'among' 34.10	<i>según</i> 'according to' 34.15	

Many of these can be combined with other words to form prepositional phrases such as *debajo de* 'underneath', *frente a* 'opposite', *a razón de* 'at the rate of', etc. A list of common prepositional phrases is included at 34.19.

English speakers should take literally the meaning of the Spanish word *posición*, 'something placed in front', since Spanish prepositions appear only immediately before noun phrases. This makes the structure of English sentences like 'the house I'm talking about' impossible in Spanish: *la casa de la que estoy hablando, never \*la casa que estoy hablando de*.

For the same reason many grammarians, including the Academy, reject sentences like *¿la cerámica es hecha por y para los mismos habitantes del pueblo* 'the pottery is made by and for the villagers themselves' since *por* here stands in front of a conjunction, *y*. They prefer ... *es hecha por los habitantes del pueblo y para ellos mismos*. Similarly, 'I'll go with or without you' should be translated *iré contigo o sin ti*, not *\*iré con o sin ti*. But this 'rule' is constantly broken, and the linguist Valentín García Yebra<sup>1</sup> sees no objection to phrases like *el tráfico aéreo desde y hacia Berlín* 'air traffic to and from Berlin', *la imagen construida en y por el texto* 'the

image constructed in and by the text'. The 'correct' constructions, *tráfico aéreo hacia Berlín y desde él*, *la imagen construída en el texto y por él* are long-winded.

On the other hand, omission of prepositions should be avoided: \**personas acusadas de pertenecer y colaborar con el movimiento terrorista* 'persons accused of belonging and collaborating with the terrorist movement' sounds bad in both languages: . . . *acusadas de pertenecer al movimiento terrorista y de colaborar con él* is correct, . . . *pertenecer a y colaborar con el movimiento terrorista* is possible, but may offend purists. However, this rule can produce cumbersome sentences: *entraban y salían del edificio* 'they entered and left the building' is nowadays usual, even if purists theoretically require *entraban en el edificio y salían de él*. And, as García Yebra points out, no one would say \**un billete de ida a Segovia y de vuelta de ella* for *un billete de ida y vuelta a Segovia* 'a round trip to Segovia' / 'a return ticket to Segovia'.

The English language is precise in defining spatial location or movement; Spanish is often quite vague. The subtle differences between the colloquial English uses of spatial adverbs, as in 'I'm going to/across to/round to/down to/up to/over to the shops' are virtually untranslatable: *voy a las tiendas*. The Spanish word *en* can mean 'in', 'inside', 'at', 'on' according to context. Very often the meaning of English prepositions must be expressed by a suitable Spanish verb: 'he's in prison' = *está en la cárcel*, 'he's at the prison' = *ha ido a la cárcel*; 'he walked through the city' = *atravesó la ciudad* / *pasó por la ciudad*, 'he walked round the city' (*se*) *paseó por la ciudad* / *dio una vuelta por la ciudad* / *deambuló por la ciudad*.

### 34.1 A

This very common preposition has many uses. Apart from the problems they have with personal *a* before certain kinds of direct object (discussed in Chapter 22), English speakers tend to misuse it when translating phrases like 'at the dentist's', 'at Cambridge', 'at the station'. See (c) for discussion.

(a) Motion, to, at, up, down, etc.:

Almost any verb or noun indicating motion is likely to be followed by *a*. As a result its meaning includes 'on', 'into', 'down', 'up', as well as 'to' and 'at':

<i>Por fin llegaron a Managua</i>	They finally got to Managua
<i>Fui alpara que me diera hora</i>	I went to make an appointment
<i>Bajó al sótano</i>	He went down to the basement
<i>Se acercó al buzón</i>	He approached the letter box
<i>El gato se subió a un árbol</i>	I got into the car/on the train
<i>Salté a un autobús</i>	The cat ran up a tree
<i>Lanzaban piedras alcontra las ventanas</i>	I jumped on a bus
<i>Arrojó la espada al aire</i>	They were throwing stones at the windows
<i>Entró alpara saludarnos</i>	He hurled the sword into the air
<i>Salieron alpara dar batalla</i>	It came in to say hello to us
<i>Lo pegó alfen el sobre</i>	They went out to do battle
<i>Cuégase al cuello</i>	He's come to talk to you
<i>(cf. cuélgalo en la pared</i>	She stuck it on the envelope
<i>Cauó al suelotal mar</i>	Hang it round his neck
	It fell to the ground into the sea

*salida a la calle*  
*tiro al blanco*

way out to the street  
target shooting

### Notes

- (i) *A* is omitted after verbs of motion before *aquí*, *ahí*, *allí*, *allí*: *ven aquí/ven acá/ven aquí/ven acá* 'come here', *vaya voy/voy para allá* 'I'm going there'.
- (ii) Compare Spain *entrar en el cuarto*. Latin America, *entró al cuarto* 'he entered the room' - Chile *ingresó a la Conferencia sobre Desarme (La Época, Chile)* 'Chile joins Disarmament Conference' - although *entrar a* is sometimes heard in Spain (and always before infinitives). The noun everywhere takes *a*: *entrada a la galería* 'entrance to the gallery'. Spain also prefers *en* with *penetrar* 'penetrate', *ingresar* 'to join (club, etc.)', *introducir* 'to insert', but the use of *a* is widespread in Latin America, cf. *ingresa como adepto laico a la orden* (J. L. Borges) 'he entered (historic present) the order as a lay follower'.

(iii) *Para* is also found colloquially after *ir*: *voy para Lugo* 'I'm heading for Lugo'.

(b) Direction, 'at':

*Mira al techo y no te entrará agua*

Look up at the ceiling and you won't get water in your eyes

*Apunta a la bombilla*

Aim at the light bulb

### Note

Spanish differentiates *mirar a* 'to look towards/in the direction of' and *mirar* 'to look at'; compare *mira este cuadro con detenimiento* 'look at this painting attentively' and *mira a la derecha/la izquierda* 'look to the right/to the left'.

(c) After verbs of giving, sending, informing, etc.:

*Dáselo a papá*

Give it to father

*Le envió cien dólares a su hijo*

He sent his son \$100

*Le dejó su finca a su yerno*

He left his country estate to his son-in-law

*Comunicáremos los datos a los aseguradores*

We will inform the insurers of the details

(d) Place (static):

The use of the preposition *a* to indicate 'at' or 'in' a place is limited in Spanish. English speakers - particularly those who know French, German or Italian - must not use *a* in sentences like *estoy haciendo mis estudios en Cambridge* 'I'm studying at Cambridge', *te esperaré en la estación* 'I'll wait for you at the station' (cf. *a la gare, am Bahnhof, alla stazione*, etc.), *vive en Londres* '(s)he lives in London' (*él habite à Londres*), etc. Apart from set phrases like *al lado de* 'at the side of', *a la luz de* 'in the light of', *a* can only be used with a few nouns like *vuelta*, 'turn', 'return' (*a mi vuelta de* 'on my return from'), *salida* 'exit', *entrada* 'entrance' which denote actions or moments in time rather than places. *Os esperaré a la salida* is best thought of as 'I'll wait for you on the way out' rather than 'at the exit', which is *en la salida*.

In phrases like *estaba asomado a la ventana* 'he was leaning in/out of the window' *asomar* is a verb of motion: *estaba en la ventana* is, however, safer than *estaba a la ventana* 'he was at the window'. Similarly, *fue a Salamanca a estudiar* is only a variant of *fue a Salamanca a estudiar* 'he went to Salamanca to study': it does not mean 'he went to study at Salamanca University' - . . . *en Salamanca*.

*A* is used to translate 'at' in a number of situations involving close proximity to an object, e.g. *a la barra* 'at the bar', *a la mesa* 'at table' (i.e. 'at mealttime'); but

- Vino a la vuelta  
a orillas del mar  
Ot pasos a mi espalda  
Se pasa horas sentado al ordenador  
Se arrodilló a los pies de la Virgen  
Está con el agua al cuello  
a la izquierda/derecha de  
a lo lejos/en la distancia  
Se sentaron al sol/a la luz/al calor del  
fuego/a la sombra/al amparo de un roble
- Compare:  
Esperame en la parada del autobús  
Estaba parado en un semáforo  
Mario está en el banco  
Los niños están en el colegio  
(cf. mi hijo todavía no va al colegio)  
... para que el coche no estuviera tanto  
tiempo estacionado en la puerta (G.  
García Márquez, Colombia. *Coche* here  
refers to a horse-drawn carriage)  
La vi en la puerta de la iglesia
- I live round the corner  
on the seashore  
I heard footsteps at my back  
He spends hours sitting at the computer  
He knelt at the feet of the Virgin  
He's up to his neck (in trouble; hasta implies  
real water)  
to the left/right (cf. a diestro y siniestro 'to  
right and left', i.e. 'on all sides')  
in the distance  
They sat in the sun/light/warmth of the  
fire/shade/in the shelter of an oak
- Wait for me at the bus stop  
He was waiting at a traffic light  
Mario is at/in the bank  
The children are in/at school  
My son isn't at school yet, i.e. doesn't go  
yet  
... so the carriage wouldn't be parked so  
long at the door  
I saw her at the church door

## Notes

- (i) A la puerta is also good Spanish for 'at the door', but we found that some American informants preferred en - but compare Morelli habla del neapolitano que se pasó años sentado a la puerta de su casa (J. Cortázar, Argentina) Morelli speaks of the Neapolitan who spent years sitting at the door of his house.  
(ii) Spanish thus has no prepositions that can differentiate 'he's at the hospital' and 'he's in (the) hospital': verbs are used instead - ha ido al hospital and está en el hospital.

- (e) Manner (adverbial phrases of manner with *a* are numerous):

a pie/a mano/a lápiz	on foot/by hand/in pencil
a golpes/a tiros/a patadas	with blows/by shooting/with kicks
Pedía socorro a gritos	He was shouting for help
un documento escrito a máquina	a typed document
El servicio es a voluntad del cliente	Service charge at the customer's discretion
Las patatas están a punto	The potatoes are done
Le cortaron el pelo al rape	They cropped his hair short
Estoy a dieta	I'm on a diet
a la buena de Dios	any old how/willy-nilly
a oscuras/a la luz del día	in the dark/by daylight
Las verduritas se pueden guisar al vapor	Vegetables can be steamed
Estaba vestido a la inglesa	He was dressed English-style
a la manera de Dickens (M. Torres, Spain)	in the style of Dickens

## Note

The curious construction with *a* found in the phrase *sois dos a ganar* 'there are two of you earning' may perhaps be included under this heading.

- (f) In certain time phrases:

Bonos del Estado a diez años Se casaron a los veinte años (Se casaron con veinte años) al día siguiente/el otro día a la mañana siguiente a la caída de la noche/al alba al mismo tiempo A su recepción pagaré la cantidad estipulada a su regreso, a su llegada Estamos a miércoles/a quince tres veces al por día Se enfada al por la menor provocación	ten-year Government Bonds They got married at the age of twenty on the following day the following morning at nightfall/at dawn at the same time On receipt I shall pay the stipulated amount on his return, on his arrival it's Wednesday/the fifteenth three times a day He gets angry at the slightest provocation
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A is particularly common in the construction *al* + infinitive where it means 'on ... -ing', e.g. *al ver* 'on seeing', *al volverse* 'as he turned round/back'. See 18.3.3.

## Notes

- (i) One can say *a su muerte se dividió el reino en tres partes* 'at his death the kingdom was divided into three parts', but only *cuando nació ...* 'at his birth ...'  
(ii) Note the construction *ya deben estar al llegar* 'they must be about to arrive'.

- (g) To translate 'of' or 'like' after verbs meaning 'smell', 'taste', 'sound', and also after the nouns derived from some of these:

Me suena a cuento chino	It sounds like a tall story to me
Esto sabe a pescado	This tastes of fish
En esta casa huele a quemado	There's a smell of burning in this house
La buena leche huele a fresca	Good milk smells fresh
Esta mantequilla apesta a ajo	This butter reeks of garlic
Había un leve olor a fritura y a crema bronceadora (F. Umbral, Spain)	There was a faint smell of frying and suntan cream
La ginethra tiene un sabor a agua de colonia	Gin has a taste like eau de Cologne

- (h) 'Fitted with', 'propelled by':

Grammarians reject *a* as a Gallicism in the following constructions, but most of them are normal in everyday language:

olla a presión	pressure cooker
caldera al/de gas-oil	oil-fired boiler
motor al/de dos tiempos	two-stroke motor
un suplemento a color (El País, also en color)	a colour supplement
un avión al/de dos motores	a twin-engine plane
un coche que va al por metanol	a methanol-powered car

## Note

The use of *a* to denote an ingredient is occasionally seen in advertising language but it should not be imitated: *crema bronceadora a lanolina* 'suntan cream with lanolin' (better *con lanolina*).

- (i) Rate, measure, speed, amount, distance:

Se vende a mil pesos el metro	It's on sale at 1,000 pesos a metre
¿A cómo están las peras?	How much are the pears?
Volaba a más de dos mil kilómetros	It was flying at more than 2,000 km per

Compraba libros de seguridad mano que  
luego revendía o cambiaba a razón de dos  
por uno (L. Coytiso, Spain)  
Está a cinco manzanas (Latin America):  
cuadras de aquí  
si Vd. tiene un 80386 a 20 Mhz y un  
módem a 28.800 bps ... (computer  
manual, Spain)  
a monitores  
Trabaja a ratos/la veces

He used to buy second-hand comics which  
he then resold or swapped at the rate of  
two for one  
It's five blocks from here

if you have a 20-megahertz 80386  
(computer) and a 28,800 bits-per-second  
modem ...  
in heaps  
He works now and again/sometimes

(j) It translates 'from' after a number of words with such meanings as 'steal',  
'confiscate', 'buy', and after *oír* 'to hear':

Le robaron una sortija a mi tía  
Le compró un coche a su vecino  
una banda de traficantes de drogas, a los  
que aprehendieron trece kilos de cocaína  
(La Vanguardia, Spain)  
Se lo dio a Amparo  
Eso se lo has oído a tu padre

They stole a ring from my aunt  
He bought a car from his neighbour  
a gang of drug-peddlers, from whom  
thirteen kilos of cocaine were confiscated  
I heard Amparo say it  
You've heard that from your father

And similarly verbs such as *quitar* 'take away', *sustraer* 'steal', *confiscar* 'confis-  
cate', *llevarse* 'take away', *sacar* 'to take out/remove', etc. However, *recibir* 'to  
receive', *adquirir* 'to acquire' and *aceptar* 'to accept' take *de*: *aceptar algo de alguien*  
'to accept something from someone'.

(k) Before certain types of direct object (the so-called 'personal *a*', e.g. *vi al gitano*  
'I saw the gypsy'). See Chapter 22 for detailed discussion.

(l) After verbs meaning 'begin', 'start', 'get ready to ...':

Rompí a llorar  
Eché a correr  
El cielo empezaba a despejarse

He burst into tears  
She broke into a run  
The sky was beginning to clear

and similarly after *comenzar* 'to begin', *ponerse* 'to start to', *prepararse* 'to get  
ready to', *disponerse* 'to prepare oneself to', *meterse* 'to take up ...' (usually  
with some implication of futility, as in *no te metas a (psicoterapia) con él, porque  
solamente complicarás las cosas* 'don't get into being a psychotherapist with him,  
because you'll only complicate things').

(m) After numerous verbs, adjectives and adverbs which must be learnt  
separately:

Aspiraba a hacerse médico  
Acostumbrában a hacerlo  
Tienes que hacerte al trabajo  
Prefiero una vida mediocre a ser héroe  
Te ayudaré a apretar las tuercas  
Et viejo argumento de que la religión  
sirve de freno a los instintos  
Se ha concertado al budismo  
jugar al fútbol/hockey  
tocar algo al acordeón/la guitarra  
Pudo saltarse agarrándose a/de un árbol

He was aiming to become a doctor  
They habitually did it  
You have to get used to the work  
I prefer a mediocre life to being a hero  
I'll help you tighten the nuts  
The old argument that religion serves as a  
curb on the instincts  
He's converted to Buddhism  
to play soccer/hockey  
to play something on the accordion/guitar  
He managed to save himself by clinging to  
a tree

Tendrán emboscadas a las Ninifas  
(J. L. Borges, Argentina)

They laid ambushes for the Nymphs

(n) To link two nouns whenever ambiguity might arise from the use of *de*: *el  
amor de Dios* = 'God's love' and *el amor a Dios* 'love for God'. Often either pre-  
position is possible. *A* is also often used to link two nouns when a common verbal  
phrase exists which also requires *a*, e.g. *les tiene miedo a los toros* 'he's afraid of  
bulls', *su miedo a los toros* 'his fear of bulls':

*el abrazo de un padre a su hijo* the embrace that a father gives to his son  
*el amor a la patria* love for one's home country  
*el respeto a la autoridad* respect for authority  
*Lo denunciaron como traidor al/de su clase* They denounced him as a traitor to his class  
*La Casa Blanca confirmó el boicot a los* The White House confirmed the boycott  
 *Juegos de Moscú (Cambio16, Spain)* of the Moscow Games  
*Insimé algo en el prólogo al libro de* I hinted something in the prologue to  
*Luffage ... (O. Paz, Mexico; del possible)* Lafayette's book ...  
*Espero que no sea una referencia personal* I hope it's not a personal reference to me  
*a mí*  
*El culto al sol tendría sus ventajas* Sun-worship would have its advantages  
*El departamento se encargará de la* The department will take over  
*protección al/de la carretera* responsibility for protecting roads

#### Note

With words like *miedo* 'fear' or *amor* 'love' one can use *de* if no ambiguity arises; compare *así que  
tiene miedo de las cucarachas* (C. Martín Gaité, Spain, dialogue) so you're afraid of cockroaches ...

#### 34.2 Ante

'Before' (i.e. 'in front of' or 'in the presence of' and, like the English 'before', it  
can in literary usage have a spatial meaning, 'facing'/'in front of'; compare *me  
eché en la cama ante la televisión* (J. Marías, Spain) 'I lay down on the bed in front  
of/before the television', *detuvo el coche ante la que parecía ser mansión de los Conte-  
late* (J. L. Borges, Argentina) 'he stopped the car in front of/outside what  
seemed to be the Conesals' mansion', *ante el negro y el niño había dos tazas de choco-  
late* (J. L. Borges, Argentina) 'in front of/before the black man and the child were  
two cups of chocolate'. *Delante de* is used in everyday language for this spatial  
meaning. *Ante* is, however, very common in the figurative meaning of 'faced  
with', 'in the face of'. It must not be confused with the entirely separate word  
*antes* 'before' (in time). Examples:

*Se sentía nervioso al comparecer ante el* He felt nervous on appearing before the  
*tribunal* court  
*Ante mí/frente a mí/Delante de mí se* Before me there rose an enormous tower  
*elecaba una enorme torre*  
*... y ellas presuntivas de parienta famosa* ... and they boasted of having a famous  
*ante las otras viejas (M. Torres, Spain)* female relative in front of/in the presence  
*of the other old women*  
*ante este dilema ...* faced with this dilemma ...  
*ante tamaño insulto ...* in the face of such an insult ...  
*Ante tantas posibilidades, no sabía cuál* Faced with so many possibilities, he didn't  
*escoger* know which to choose