

A Simplified Method of Teaching the Position of Object Pronouns in Spanish

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Abstract: The placement of direct, indirect, and reflexive object pronouns is often presented disjointedly in textbooks. We offer a succinct, easily-learned pair of mnemonic devices that have universal applicability for the position of object pronouns in Spanish sentences. The acronym IGA indicates that these pronouns follow and are appended to infinitives, gerunds, and affirmative commands; otherwise, the pronouns directly precede the verb. In sentences where two positions are allowed, application of the IGA rule will reveal both possibilities. The acronym RID prescribes the sequential order of two object pronouns to be always reflexive, indirect, and direct, whether they precede or follow the verb. Additionally, the use of accent marks when pronouns are appended to verbs and the substitution of *se* for *le* or *les* are simplified in a concise didactic system.

Key Words: Spanish object pronouns, word order in Spanish

Many good college textbooks for elementary Spanish introduce direct, indirect, and reflexive object pronouns over many pages and several lessons, with other topics intervening. **A**¹ treats reflexives in Chapter 4, indirect object pronouns in Chapter 6, and direct object pronouns in Chapter 7. The “nosotros” commands and the use of pronouns with them are left until Chapter 15. **B** likewise separates object pronouns into Chapters 4, 6, and 7. **C** begins with direct object pronouns in Lección 4, adds the indirect objects and reflexives in Lección 5, and concludes with first-person plural commands in Lección 10. **D** spreads the object pronouns over Chapters 7 and 8, and explains the combined use of two pronouns in Chapter 11.

In intermediate texts the spacing of material on object pronouns is similar. **E** gives direct object and indirect object pronouns in Lesson 2, but reflexives are held until Lesson 4. Sixty-four pages of grammar and exercises come between where object pronouns are first mentioned and a final summary table of them on page 100. **F** begins with reflexives in Capítulo 2, continues with “nosotros” commands in Capítulo 4, and treats direct and indirect object pronouns in Capítulo 5. **G** includes both direct and indirect object pronouns and their combined usage in Lección 3 but leaves reflexives for Lección 4. **H** teaches the various object pronouns in Chapters 3 and 6. **I**, in contrast, includes all the object pronouns in its Unit 12.

Even in some books of advanced Spanish grammar, this topic is presented in an analogous way. In **J** the forms, usage, and position of object pronouns receive intermittent attention from page 53 to page 356. **K**, on the other hand, neatly presents all the object pronouns within two pages (411–12).

From these representative texts the general pattern is clear: in Spanish grammar textbooks the usual treatment of the object pronouns is gradual and extended. There is sound reason for this separation of material, especially in introductory textbooks. Authors want to minimize students’ confusion of the various object pronouns by teaching them individually, in isolation from one another. But this diffuse presentation also leads to multiple instructions on the *placement* of the object pronouns. In **A** directions for placement occur on pages 93, 105, 157, 181, 335, and 373. In **E** this topic is first addressed on page 37 and not concluded until page 195. **G** teaches the three kinds of pronouns in Lessons 3 and 4 but extends

instruction on their placement over Lessons 3, 4, and 6. Even textbooks that are more concise in dealing with the location of the various object pronouns do not succinctly formulate easily-memorized guides for placement of them. **C**, for example, explains the placing of a single object pronoun on one page (143) and the sequence of indirect and direct-object pronouns on another page (204), but does not offer students a summary formula as a learning aid. **H** furnishes an orderly and compact chart of the positions of direct and indirect object pronouns (66), but this intermediate-level reference work also lacks an integrating formula for placement. The advanced-level **K** recapitulates the position of these pronouns in three briefly stated rules (412), but again this is without a succinct mnemonic aid.

Such spread-out presentations, or even a more concentrated but still inconclusive treatment, should be complemented by a clarifying and systematizing pedagogy that draws together and reiterates the basic rules of placement in a concise didactic form. In reality, the placement of the Spanish object pronouns is quite simple—it is simple to summarize, simple to teach, and simple to learn.

First, let us define the issue. The personal object pronouns are the direct object, indirect object, and reflexive particles that replace nouns (and noun modifiers).² The object pronouns all operate in the same way with regard to place.³ They are “clitics,” that is, elements that must be used with another word; in this case, with a verb. The grammatical and pedagogical issue is when these entities are “proclitics” (i.e., come before the verb) and when they are “enclitics” (i.e., come after the verb).

In sentences that contain one object pronoun, a simple acronym defines placement of the pronoun. The letters **IGA** indicate that object pronouns follow infinitives, gerunds, and affirmative commands but precede all other verb forms.⁴ This rule succinctly summarizes the range of possibilities that can be encountered; it is valid for declarative, interrogative, and imperative sentences, and, indeed, it pertains to all persons of the imperative: *Ud.*, *Uds.*, *tú*, *vosotros*, and *nosotros*.

In our choice of the term “gerund” for the form of the Spanish verb with the invariable ending *-ndo*, we follow the practice of Holton (55), Jarvis (8), Rosso-O’Laughlin (139) and others for the pragmatic reason that students can easily equate the word “gerund,” which ends in *-nd*, with the Spanish form that ends in *-ndo* (e.g., *hablando*, *comiendo*, *viviendo*).⁵ Textbooks written in Spanish, such as Bárbara Mujica’s advanced grammar *El próximo paso*, also label this a gerund: “el gerundio es la forma que termina en *-ndo*. En inglés, esta forma termina en *-ing*” (16).

To begin an illustration of the IGA rule, we can substitute (or add) pronouns in the proper place in the following sentences.

Marta escribe una carta.	>	Marta la escribe. (direct object)
Marta escribe a su hermana.	>	Marta le escribe. (indirect object)
Marta escribe una nota.	>	Para no olvidar, Marta se escribe una nota. (reflexive)

In all these cases the object pronoun, whether it is a direct, indirect, or reflexive object, goes before the verb because the verb is not an **I** (infinitive), not a **G** (gerund), and not an **A** (affirmative command). These pronouns function as proclitics, and so they must be located immediately before the verb. Thus if our sentence were negative (*Marta no escribe una carta*), the sentence with the pronoun would be “*Marta no la escribe*,” for nothing may intrude between the proclitic pronoun and the verb.

The first model sentence above can be slightly expanded to “*Marta quiere escribir una carta*.” If the direct object pronoun *la* is substituted for *una carta* now, the application of the IGA rule will render two answers. One may focus on the infinitive *escribir* and arrive at “*Marta quiere escribir la*.” On the other hand, the verb *quiere* is not an **I** (infinitive), not a **G** (gerund), and not an **A** (affirmative command), so we can also say “*Marta la quiere escribir*.”⁶ The rule will not suggest any other position for *la* (such as between the two verbs), and no

other position is grammatically allowed.

This is the great advantage of the **IGA** rule: when two positions for the object pronoun are possible, it will provide both options.

The same possibility of two locations for the pronoun occurs when a gerund and an auxiliary verb are involved. If we alter the original sentence to “Marta está escribiendo una carta” and again substitute *la* for *una carta*, the result will be “Marta está escribiéndola” because *escribiendo* is a gerund; but we can also say “Marta *la* está escribiendo” because *está* is not an **I**, a **G**, or an **A**. No other position for the pronoun will be called for by the **IGA** rule. Once again, this application of this rule will point out no fewer, and no more, than all the grammatically allowable positions for the object pronoun.

With an affirmative command, only one place is possible for the pronoun—after the verb: *escribela* (*tú*), *escribala* (*Ud.*), *escribanla* (*Uds.*), *escribidla* (*vosotros*), and *escribámosla* (*nosotros*).⁷

The direct object pronoun *la* has been employed in most of our illustration of the **IGA** rule, but everything that has been stated regarding word order holds true for all the direct, indirect, and reflexive pronouns.

The use of accent marks when a pronoun is appended to the end of a verb is based on the principle of maintaining the original accentuation pattern of the verb. The first step is to determine where the stress was on the verb before a pronoun was added. All infinitives, of course, end in *r*, all gerunds end in *o*, and all affirmative commands end in a vowel (in singular commands) or the consonants *n* (in plural commands), *s* (in first-person plural commands), or *d* (for *vosotros*). Exceptions are the irregular *tú* imperatives: *haz*, *sal*, etc. The accentuation for all these forms is the general pattern for Spanish: stress falls on the next-to-last syllable for words ending in any vowel or *n* or *s*, and on the last syllable for words ending in any consonant except *n* or *s*. After the place of stress for the verb without the pronoun has been determined by applying these principles, the pronoun enclitic is attached to the verb and the same principles (word ending in vowel, *n* or *s*=stress on next-to-last syllable; word ending in another consonant=stress on last syllable) are applied to the new verb-pronoun unit to see if the stress would change. If the addition of the pronoun would move the stress on the verb, an accent mark must be written where the stress was originally; if the place of stress would not change, an accent mark is not written.

However, this underlying logic for the use of accent marks need not be thoroughly mastered in order to use them accurately when adding pronouns to verbs. In practical terms, the explanation can be that an accent mark is not placed on an infinitive when one pronoun is appended, but an accent mark is always written on the last vowel before *-ndo* when one pronoun is added to a gerund. With affirmative commands, an accent mark will be necessary on the last syllable of the verb unless the verb contains only one syllable, like *pon*, *ten*, *di*, and so forth. With these one-syllable verbs, an accent mark is not added.

The placement of object pronouns is the same in sentences that involve two pronouns, but the new issue that must be addressed is the order of these pronouns among themselves. For the internal sequence of clitics, we introduce a second mnemonic device. This is the acronym **RID**, which means that the order of object pronouns is always: reflexive, indirect, direct. The same order is observed whether the pronouns follow or precede the verb. M. Kasey Hellerman has developed this guideline in *¿Qué me cuenta?* (26), a Spanish conversation text that is now out of print.

To illustrate the combined application of the **IGA** and **RID** rules, we can go back to our original sentence (“Marta escribe una carta”) and add on another object to denote the recipient of the letter: “Marta *me* escribe una carta.” Then, if a pronoun is substituted for *una carta*, there will be two pronouns, and the word order will be: “Marta *me la* escribe.” **IGA** demands locating the pronouns in front of *escribe*, and **RID** demands that the indirect *me* precede the direct *la*.

Although **RID** fixes the relative position of all three types of pronouns—reflexive,

indirect, and direct—, they will not actually be used together in sequence; one or more of the three will always be absent. To explain this, Carlos Otero (169–70) has recourse to the terminology of Chomsky in generating a “surface exclusion rule” that precludes the possibility of *se* plus two other clitics. But the theoretical basis for the exclusion is not of import here. Suffice it to say, for our pedagogical purposes, that all three elements of **RID** will never be present concurrently.

Returning again to our model sentences, if we take “Marta va a escribir una carta,” expand it to “Marta va a escribirme una carta,” and substitute for *una carta*, we end up with either “Marta *me la* va a escribir” or “Marta va a escribirmela.”

One usually cannot split the two pronouns up and put one before *va* and the other after *escribir*. It is possible to split them only in sentences like “no *se* permite bañarse aquí” or “no *lo* dejes insultarnos” where one pronoun clearly goes with one verb and the other pronoun clearly goes with the other verb.

In the case of a gerund, “Marta está escribiéndome una carta” or “Marta me está escribiendo una carta” will become “Marta está escribiéndomela” or “Marta *me la* está escribiendo.” The affirmative commands are “escribemela (tú),” “escribamela (Ud.),” etc.

Thus we combine **IGA** to get the pronouns in the right position in the sentence with **RID** to get the pronouns in the right order among themselves. With these two simple acronyms, **IGA** and **RID**, everything falls into place—literally, “falls into place.”

As we work with two pronouns, we note that whenever two that begin with the letter *L* come in a row, the first pronoun changes to *se*. Thus, *le la* becomes *se la*; *les los* becomes *se los*, etc. Many textbooks explain that *le* and *les* become *se* before *lo*, *la*, *los* and *las* (C 205, F 140, and A 248), while other books state that if both pronouns are third person, the first one changes to *se* (e.g., I 173). A simple, but accurate, way to teach this is to have students focus on the first letter of the pronouns and to change the first pronoun to *se* (which is not a reflexive) when both pronouns start with *L*. *Puntos de partida* (267) employs this simplified explanation.

And finally, accent marks will, logically, be more frequently needed to preserve original verb stress when two pronouns are appended to the verb. In fact, a written accent is always required if two pronoun objects are added to the end of a verb. On infinitives, the accent mark will be on the letter before the *r*; on gerunds, it will be on the last letter before the *ndo*; and on affirmative commands, it will be on the vowel of the next to last syllable in command forms of more than one syllable, and on the vowel of the only syllable there is in commands of one syllable, for example, *escribemela*, *dígaselo*, or *dénmelos*. A fine point regarding accents is that when there are diphthongs, an accent mark is not placed over a *u* or an *i* but rather over the other vowel, as in *muéstramelo* or *traígaselos*.

The guidelines we have explained describe the position of the personal object pronouns in modern Spanish. However, students will not infrequently encounter different word order as they read pre-contemporary literature. Most often this will be the placing of an object pronoun after a conjugated verb or a past participle. One need look no further than Chapter I of *Don Quijote* (1038) to find many such cases, among them, “perdía el pobre caballero el juicio y desvelábase por entenderlas” and “Llenóse la fantasía de todo aquello que leía en los libros.” As demonstrated by this second quotation from Cervantes, in older literature there was a particular aversion to beginning sentences with an object pronoun. Moreover, Otero mentions postposition (“enclisis”) as a stylistic practice that “increased substantially during the Romantic period” (172). Nor does this tendency end with Romanticism, as can easily be observed in the works of Ramón del Valle-Inclán: “limpióse dos lágrimas,” “rece-lóse,” “quírense desde hace muchos años” (73, 101, 102), etc. Actually, one finds such word order in works of many periods of Spanish literature in formulaic phrases like “érase una vez” or “érase que se era” (= “once upon a time”).

These examples from literature, while necessary to note, do not constitute the norm in modern Spanish. The norm is, in fact, an extremely regular, even rigid, proclitic and enclitic

positioning system that is represented by the acronyms and guidelines we have explained. The IGA and RID rules, plus the simplified guide for replacing *le* and *les* by *se* and the summaries of written accent usage presented above, together constitute a concise, practical pedagogical method for instructors to teach, and students to learn, the placement, order, alteration, and accentuation of verb-pronoun clusters in Spanish.

NOTES

¹The textbooks examined for the present study will be referred to by the letters **A, B, C**, etc. Readers with a need to know the identity of a particular reference may contact the author.

²The origin and historical development of these forms are extensively traced by Joel Rini in his monograph *Motives for Linguistic Change in the Formation of the Spanish Object Pronouns*. Rini indicates (2) that the placement of these pronouns lies beyond the area of his study.

³Excluded from consideration are pronoun objects of a preposition, for they naturally follow the preposition.

⁴I wish to acknowledge with gratitude the late Agnes Jennings Draper as the source of the IGA mnemonic aid.

⁵Some books use the technically more accurate term “present participle” for this form. See Crystal’s *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Language and Languages* (290–91) for the distinction between “gerund” and “participle.”

⁶Dozier and Iguina (66–67) list the relatively infrequent instances in which the object pronoun must follow the infinitive and may not precede the conjugated verb. We suggest that their rule that the pronoun cannot precede the conjugated verb “if the infinitive follows a preposition” should be amended, for such a sentence as *lo voy a comprar* is allowable.

⁷Constructions of the type *que lo haga Jorge* are not to be considered affirmative commands but rather truncated expressions based on the pattern *quiero que lo haga Jorge* that requires a subjunctive after a verb of volition and a change of subject.

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