

# The Conceptual Semantics of ‘Latin America’: Popular Geopolitics and Spanish Language Teaching in Denmark

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## Abstract

This article explores how the concept of ‘Latin America’ is constructed in connection with the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language in Denmark, and how it is received and understood by Spanish learners in the country. The paper explores the concept of Latin America from different perspectives: Danish learners, young Latin Americans and through a historical overview, in order to embrace its complexity. The hypothesis is that the conceptualization of ‘Latin America’ in the context of language teaching in Denmark does not do justice to the diversity and richness of the geographical area and its peoples.

**Keywords:** Latin America, foreign language learning and teaching, intercultural education, NSM

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore how the concept of ‘Latin America’ (and its cognates in different languages) is constructed and presented in Denmark – and to some degree in Scandinavia in general – in connection with the learning and teaching of Spanish as a foreign language. In this context, there is a tendency to frame the Spanish-speaking world as consisting of two blocks, Spain and Latin America, with the latter often presented in superficial and stereotypical terms. The paper explores what this presentation of the Spanish-speaking world means for the view that Danish learners of Spanish have of the Latin American region. I will also discuss whether the use of the term ‘Latin America’ contributes to creating a Eurocentric and simplified view of a vast geographical area consisting of a large number of countries, each with their rich and varied history, society, cultural values and language landscape. My claim is that the presentation of the Spanish-speaking world with a simplified view of the vast Spanish speaking regions in the American continent may hinder the promotion of critical cultural awareness in the classroom (Byram 1997; Risager 2018; Fernández 2019).

The concept of ‘Latin America’ is controversial from its very origin, which some authors have located in Europe (e.g. Phelan 1986) and others in the American continent itself (e.g. Quijada 1998). Today, the term is widely used on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as around the world, but the question is whether it is conceptualized in the same way and whether it serves the same purposes. Through corpus analysis of Scandinavian teaching materials and informant consultations in Denmark and in the Latin American region itself, I will try to unravel some meanings and uses associated to the term. The

theoretical and methodological framework of Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) semantics will provide a metalanguage for explanations.

This article is organized as follows: After this brief introduction, I will outline in section 2 some of the main areas that constitute the conceptual and methodological backdrop for this study. I will introduce the field of foreign language learning and teaching, with particular attention to intercultural education; the new and upcoming field of popular geopolitics, which is the *leitmotif* of the articles included in this special issue, and the theory of Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), which will inform my semantic analysis of the term ‘Latin America’. Once the theoretical and methodological framework has been established, I will devote to the analysis of the term ‘Latin America’ (more specifically its versions in Spanish and the Scandinavian languages, *América Latina* and *Latinamerika*, respectively). I will postulate the term as a cultural keyword and I will discuss the different aspects that can contribute to a fuller understanding of the term: its origin and the context for its coinage, its use throughout time and its conceptualization and function in the specific context of foreign language teaching. Using NSM methodology, I will attempt to construct so-called semantic explications of the term from different perspectives. Finally, I will summarize the findings of the study and point to directions for further research.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Interculturality in foreign language learning and teaching

Foreign language learning and teaching in Europe today is largely influenced by the action approach and intercultural approach outlined in the prominent *Common European Framework for Languages* (CEFR) from the Council Europe (2001). While the action approach points towards a teaching that promotes the use of the language and sees the learner as a language user from the very beginning, the intercultural approach emphasizes the importance of the language classroom as a place of personal growth related to the enriching experience of coming into contact with different cultures and peoples. The overall objective of language courses is therefore largely the acquisition of *intercultural communicative competence* (Byram 1997) – a competence that encompasses these two approaches. On the one hand, it highlights the need for a focus on language for communication (where not only grammatical competence but also pragmatic, discourse and strategic competences are targeted) (Canale & Swain 1980), and activities that promote communication skills by learners (known in the language pedagogical literature as *communicative tasks* (e.g. Willis 1996; Ellis 2003). On the other hand, it adds an additional layer of attention related to aspects of visible and invisible culture (Peterson 2004; Sadow 2019), including, among others, cultural artifacts, nonverbal phenomena, routines and values (House 2008: 17). This “cultural turn” in second language teaching (Lo Bianco, Liddicoat & Crozet 1999; Kramsch 1993, 2006; Liddicoat & Scarino 2013; Dasli & Díaz 2017) has been captured in different models of intercultural education (see e.g. Spitzberg & Changnon 2009), but Byram’s five-pronged model of intercultural communicative competence has probably been the most influential for European language teaching, despite criticism (e.g. Matsuo 2012) of its nation-based concept of

culture (at least in its initial conception). The model includes the need for five different kinds of *savoirs*: knowledge about oneself, others and interaction, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovering and interacting, attitudes of relativizing self and valuing others, and, finally and as a result of the other *savoirs*, critical cultural awareness, also called “political education” (Byram 1997: 34). Within the area of Spanish teaching in Denmark, Byram’s concept has gained prominence after the upper secondary school reform of 2017, where intercultural communicative competence came to embody the overall objective of the Spanish subject at this educational level:

Spanish is a knowledge subject, a skills subject and a cultural subject that focuses on the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence.  
(Danish Ministry of Education 2017, my translation)

The emphasis on intercultural education that we find in the teaching of Spanish (and of other foreign languages) extends also to the other subjects of the Danish curriculum in the form of a “global competence” that all subjects should contribute to promote (Danish Ministry of Education 2016). The Danish goals for global competence align with UNESCO’s topics and learning goals for global citizen education, which among others include:

- developing an understanding of global governance structures, rights and responsibilities, global issues and connections between global, national and local systems and processes;
- recognising and appreciating difference and multiple identities, e.g. culture, language, religion, gender and our common humanity, and develop skills for living in an increasingly diverse world;
- (...)
- developing values of fairness and social justice, and skills to critically analyse inequalities based on gender, socio-economic status, culture, religion, age and other issues;
- participating in, and contributing to, contemporary global issues at local, national and global levels as informed, engaged, responsible and responsive global citizens. (UNESCO 2015: 13)

If these global-citizenship learning objectives are to be attained, it is important that the view of culture that guides the curriculum, the teaching and the available learning materials is based on a truly global perspective, free from Eurocentric prejudices. In this sense, both the teachers’ conceptions about the geopolitical areas they deal with in their classes and the teaching materials available to them will have an influence on the level of global competence and critical cultural consciousness that language courses will contribute to promote for the young learners.

Post-colonial theory can inform geopolitical discussions in the classroom, as it deals with the contemporary significance of historical relations between dominating (colonialist) and dominated states or regions. Influenced by the seminal text by Said (1978), it takes into consideration power relations in historical awareness and the question of representation, particularly as regards a global center-periphery perspective: Who

represents whom under what circumstances (Risager 2018: 158–159). A related theory is Decolonial Theory, originated in Latin America with scholars like Quijano (e.g. 2000) and Mignolo (e.g. 2000, 2005). This theory questions the perceived superiority and universality of Western knowledge that gives rise to Western “coloniality of power” (Quijano 2000). All these approaches are particularly relevant when dealing with Spanish as a foreign language, as the status and composition of the Spanish-speaking world can hardly be separated from its colonial origin, which may have perpetuated a particular imbalanced European perspective on the Spanish-speaking former colonies.

## **2.2. Popular geopolitics**

Popular geopolitics is an emerging interdisciplinary field concerned with how popular manifestations of geopolitical knowledge affect the way that we think of places and the people in those places (Saunders & Strukov 2018). The central idea is that not only scholarly or institutional discourses contribute to shaping geopolitical issues around the world, but to a high degree also everyday discourses espoused in visual media, news magazines, radio, television channels, novels, the Internet and others. Popular geopolitics is ultimately “concerned with how popular culture articulates meanings and, essentially, geopolitical spaces” and how it “constructs and reveals spatial and political fields of meaning” (Saunders & Strukov 2018: 3). In this article, I claim that teaching materials in the form of published textbooks for language (in this case, Spanish) teaching are examples of such everyday discourses. Language manuals are more often than not written by practising teachers rather than researchers or academic scholars and the geopolitical representations they reproduce will often be guided by commonly held ideas in society. At the same time, it is widely known in educational research that teaching materials have an undeniable effect on what teachers select as focus and content for their classes (Nunan 1992; Rondón & Vera 2016) and for the points of view they and their learners (perhaps unconsciously) adopt (Hansejordet 2012). Risager (2018: 4) states that “learning materials are carriers of potential knowledge” and that, as such, authors should be careful to avoid incorrect, stereotypical or biased representations (Risager 2018: 6).

Dittmer & Dodds (2008) claim that much of the literature within popular geopolitics studies has been inattentive to reception and the ways in which audiences engage with and make sense of media. They also argue that the space where reception takes place is of vital importance, as interpretation is affected by the cultural meanings available in that location (Dittmer & Dodds 2008: 449). Based on Livingstone (2005), they propose the term “cartographies of textual reception” to capture the geographically located community of interpretation. In this article, I attempt to explore the reception of constructions of Latin America by Danish learners, situated in the particular context of Scandinavia today.

## **2.3. NSM theory of semantics**

The theory of Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) has been developed during the last thirty years by Anna Wierzbicka (for example, 1992, 1997, 1999, 2006, 2010a, 2010b) and Cliff Goddard (for example, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2010), as well as a growing number of researchers around the world. The basic idea behind the theory is that most socially

established concepts and verbal behaviors are language and culture specific (as opposed to universal), but can be explained by means of a set of very basic concepts, called *semantic primes* in the theory, which can be expressed in any language (Goddard 2010). The set is at present made up of 65 concepts (see Table 1 for their exponents in English) plus a number of grammatical rules that allow their combination. This simple, non-technical metalanguage for semantic and pragmatic description constitutes the main methodological tool of the theory and is called Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM). It has been defined by Goddard & Wierzbicka (2007) as a “conceptual lingua franca”. The advantage of applying the NSM methodology of semantic analysis, known in the theory as “reductive paraphrase”, is that it allows the formulation of clear, precise, cross-translatable, non-Anglocentric explanations, which are intelligible to people without linguistic training and which capture the meaning of complex concepts from the perspective of its users (insider perspective) (Wierzbicka 1991). This is due to the fact that this methodology avoids filtering interpretation through culturally biased technical concepts.

Table 1. *English exponents of semantic primes* (Goddard 2018)

I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY	Substantives
KIND, PART	Relational Substantives
THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE	Determiners
ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY	Quantifiers
GOOD, BAD	Evaluators
BIG, SMALL	Descriptors
THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	Mental Predicates
SAY, WORDS, TRUE	Speech
DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH	Action, Events, Movement, Contact
BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, HAVE, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)	Location, Existence, Possession, Specification
LIVE, DIE	Life and Death
WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT	Time
WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE	Space
NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF	Logical Concepts
VERY, MORE	Intensifier, Augmentor
LIKE	Similarity

Wierzbicka has worked extensively on the description and analysis of specific cultural words and so-called *cultural keywords*. Cultural keywords are prominent words in a language that capture a central value or group of values and can act as a guide to understanding aspects of that culture or group. Goddard (2004: 148) defines them as “conceptual focal points of entire cultural domains, so that studying them gives us access to a dense complex of cultural values, attitudes and expectations”. Levisen & Waters (2017: 5) formulate *The Keyword Canons* with the central tenets of cultural keyword studies:

- Keywords came from discourse (they are historically situated)
- Keywords reflect cultural values
- Keywords create discursive contexts (words can create contexts as they guide people's interpretations and direct their conversations)
- Keywords maintain discourse fixities (the rise and fall of keywords marks shifts in the value system of a community)
- Keywords reveal the scripted lives of people (people partake in discourse rituals driven by keywords)
- Keywords are constitutive of a deep emic logic (all words capture a shared reality, but keywords capture what is central to everyday life and living) (Levisen & Waters 2017: 5ff)

There are no fixed formulas to identify cultural keywords in a given language, but NSM scholars often resort to frequency of use, derivative and phraseological productivity and incorporation into social meta-discourses through featuring in book, song and film titles, in set-phrases, proverbs, slogans, etc. From a methodological point of view, the identification of cultural keywords can be carried out through corpus queries and native speaker consultations via questionnaires and interviews (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2007). In my attempt to analyse the construction of the concept *América Latina*, I claim that the term can be considered a cultural keyword in Latin American societies, surpassing the mere designation of a particular geopolitical area.

### 3. The history and scope of the term *América Latina*

Taking into account Levisen & Waters' (2017: 5) claim about the historicity of cultural keywords and their status as "historical artifacts", it seems pertinent to explore the origin of the word and locate its coinage in place and time. The task is particularly interesting as there has been a long-standing controversy about the origin of the term Latin America, both as regards the decade and the continent where the term was first used, as well as by whom. Already in this historical exploration, we find signs of the fact that we are dealing with a complex term, and this complexity will increase even more when trying to define the scope of the term as regards countries and peoples comprised in it. The short presentation included in this article can hardly do justice to the great number of scholars who, during a couple of centuries, have attempted to unravel the ideas behind the construction of 'Latin America' (see the decolonial theorists mentioned above as well as Halperin Donghi 1970; Zea 1986; Rouquié 1989; Mariátegui 2005; and others). Nevertheless, in the following paragraphs, I will offer some key notions that will be relevant to understanding how the concept is communicated in Spanish teaching today.

A largely extended theory of how the denomination *América Latina* was coined claims that it appeared for the first time in 1861 in an article published in the Pan Latin oriented journal *Revue des Races latines* (Phelan 1986 in Quijada 1998). This would place the birth of the term in French (*Amérique latine*) and in France, within the context of the Second Napoleonic Empire (Napoleon III), at a time where France had an interest in strengthening their colonial aspirations in the American continent. The denomination 'Latin', as opposed to 'Spanish' or 'Iberian', would contribute to removing Spain and

Portugal from focus and justify the involvement of France in the continent, as the term “Latin” would include France as much as the other Romanic countries. The French traveler Michel Chevalier (1806–1879) has also often been mentioned as one of the first to spread the concept. He embraced the idea that the two big European “races”, Latin and German, had reproduced themselves in the American continent. The “Latin” nations of both sides of the Atlantic had, according to Chevalier, three elements in common: racial origin, Catholicism and rivals (the Germanic and Slavic races), and should be led by France in the war against their common enemies. Although he mentioned the idea of a “Latin” America, several scholars claim that he did not use the term as a label for the area (Quijada 1998; Torres Martínez 2011).

The theory of a French coinage of the term *Latin America* as a denomination for the area in 1861 has been contested by research that shows that the term was already in use by Latin American scholars a decade before (Quijada 1998). The Colombian thinker José María Torres Caicedo, the Dominican writer Francisco Muñoz del Monte and the Chilean Francisco Bilbao all wrote about a “Latin” America in the decade of 1850, although with partially different understandings of the concept (Torres Martínez 2016). The Latin-American origin of the term can, according to Quijada (1998), help explain why the denomination has been so widely accepted by Latin-Americans themselves. The birth of the term is associated with the preoccupation in the area with the expansionist menace coming from the United States (through the ideas of a Pan America espoused by the Monroe Doctrine), rather than being a label imposed from outside. For some decades, the name competed with other denominations for the area, but it is today without a doubt the most extended one, although terms like *Iberoamérica* or *Hispanoamérica* are still in use, mostly in Spain.

Regardless of its origin, the term establishes an antagonism between two different Americas, the Anglo-Saxon and Protestant North, on one side, and the Latin and Catholic South, on the other. Clearly, the term points to a European cultural legacy and excludes a vast portion of the population, of Indigenous or African descent (as well as later immigrant populations of all origins). This exclusion has given rise to different voices, some of them from indigenist movements, who in the 20<sup>th</sup> century proposed alternative names such as *Indoamérica* (Victor Haya de la Torre), *Indo-Afro-Ibero-América* (Carlos Fuentes), or *Indo-Latino-América* (Augusto Sandino), which never really got engrained as denominations (Ayala Mora 2013). In the same inclusive vein, the Mexican writer José de Vasconcelos (1925) presented the idea of Latin America as the cradle of a “fifth race” or “cosmic race” that subsumed the best features of all races and cultures, including of course the local indigenous populations.

As we have seen, the term is contradictory, inclusive and exclusive at the same time, from its very origin, and even though it is widely spread today at all levels of society (in both informal and official contexts), there is still no total consensus about its scope.

From a linguistic point of view, it would seem logical to assume that it comprises all territories where Spanish, Portuguese or French are spoken (i.e. the Latin-based languages of the region). In some contexts, however, the term can refer to Spanish-speaking territories only (as seems to be the case in the conceptualization of the term as used for Spanish language teaching in Denmark), to Spanish and Portuguese-speaking regions,

thus also including Brazil, and more seldom it can also include French-speaking territories, like Haiti (but hardly ever the province of Quebec in Canada or French-speaking enclaves in the United States). Although the Spanish language seems to be central to the concept, the regions with high concentration of Spanish speaking population in the USA are not considered part of Latin America (although these populations are known as *latinos*) and even Puerto Rico (a Spanish-speaking state associated to the USA) can sometimes be forgotten as belonging to this big community of nations.

From a geographical point of view, the Latin American territory seems to extend for thousands of miles from the Río Bravo in the north to Cape Horn in the Southern Cone. Nevertheless, this vast territorial unity is interrupted by the presence of countries that only peripherally are considered a part of the region, such as Belize, Surinam or Guyana. The same applies to the Caribbean islands, some of which may or may not be included in the Latin American community (Haiti, Granada, Jamaica and others).

Rouquié (1989) suggests that the term is probably best explained from a “cultural” point of view, but, even then, he problematizes a lack of coherence. The enormous disparity between the Latin American countries, the low density of economic relations and the fact that they have had a tendency to turn their backs on each other and look to Europe or USA are some of the contradictions. Rouquié suggests that what these countries really have in common is the fact that they do not belong to the developed “center”. At the same time, they cannot be equated to Asia or Africa, compared to which they occupy a middle position, an “extreme West”.

### **3.1. Latin America as a cultural keyword**

Based on the brief discussion of the term from the previous section, it does not seem bold to claim that the term ‘Latin America’ (and its variants and derivatives) has a high cultural significance in the area and in the minds of scholars as well as lay people. Apart from the fact that the term has an official use in a wide number of political and institutional contexts and features in the titles and contents of dozens of scholarly books, it also features in everyday discourses in the news media, the Internet and other expressions of popular culture. Popular music is, for instance, a genre that has been particularly diligent in capturing the cultural and identity salience of the concept. Latin American unity and shared struggles against oppression, as well as the stereotyped view from outside, are often portrayed in songs, some of which have acquired the status of hymns:

- (1) ...  
*Soy América Latina* 'I am Latin America  
*Un pueblo sin piernas pero que* A people without legs but who  
*camina, oye* walks, hey  
 ...  
*Aquí se respira lucha* Here you breathe fight  
*(Vamos caminando)* (We are walking)  
*Yo canto porque se escucha* I sing because it can be heard  
*(vamos caminando)* (we are walking)  
  
*Aquí estamos de pie* Here we stand  
*Que viva la América* Long Live America  
*No puedes comprar mi vida* You cannot buy my life'  
 ("Latinoamérica", Calle 13, Puerto Rico, 2011)
- (2) *Para turistas gente curiosa, es un sitio exótico para visitar*  
*Es solo un lugar económico, pero inadecuado para habitar*  
*Les ofrecen Latino América, el carnaval de Río y las ruinas aztecas*  
*Gente sucia bailando en las calles, dispuesta a venderse por algunos*  
*USA dollars*  
 'For tourists, peculiar people, it is an exotic place to visit  
 It is a cheap place but inadequate to inhabit  
 They are offered Latin America, Rio's carnival and the Aztec ruins  
 Dirty people dancing in the streets, ready to sell themselves for a  
 couple of US dollars'  
 ("Latinoamérica es un pueblo al sur de Estados Unidos", Los  
 Prisioneros, Chile, 1984)
- (3) *Todas las voces, todas* 'All the voices, all of them  
*Todas las manos, todas* All the hands, all of them  
*Toda la sangre puede* All the blood can  
*Ser canción en el viento.* Be a song in the wind  
*Canta conmigo, canta* Sing with me, sing  
*Hermano americano* American brother  
*Libera tu esperanza* Release your hope  
*Con un grito en la voz* With a scream in the voice'  
 ("Canción con todos", Armando Tejada Gómez & César Isella,  
 Argentina, 1969)

The ideals of unity and the strong emotional attachment to the region that are patent in these musical expressions have been reproduced in the results of a survey conducted by the author in 2019. In the survey, upper secondary school students from Argentina were asked to write the words/ideas that come to their mind when they think about Latin

America. 52% of the in all 50 obtained answers included only positive words and ideas, 30% had a mixture of positively and negatively loaded words, 16% were neutral (giving plain facts like “Spanish speaking countries”) and 2% (= one answer) was exclusively negative. The idea that featured most times was that of *community/brotherhood/sisterhood*, followed by *diversity* and, interestingly, *music* as an identifying factor. In several of the answers, there was a clear post-colonial consciousness of the source of the struggles in the area:

- (4) *Cuando se habla de América Latina pienso en el conjunto de países que la conforman, que están sometidos a seguir las órdenes de las grandes potencias. A su vez considero que Latinoamérica unida puede afrontar esta situación.*

‘When speaking of Latin America, I think of the group of countries that comprise it, which are subjected to following orders by the great powers. At the same time, I consider that, united, Latin America can face this situation.’

- (5) *Libertad, nacionalismo popular, independencia, opresión del imperialismo yankee-inglés-israelí, desigualdad por culpa de esto último, manipulación mediática de las grandes corporaciones, paisajes hermosos, recursos en gran cantidad, esperanza de expulsar a los opresores para siempre y revolución.*

‘Freedom, popular nationalism, independence, oppression by Yankee-English-Israeli imperialism, inequality because of the latter, media manipulation by large corporations, beautiful landscapes, large resources, hope of expelling the oppressors forever and revolution.’

- (6) *Lo veo también de un lado histórico, somos una parte de América que siempre estuvo subordinada a los intereses de los otros continentes o la gran parte, pero también estamos unidos como hermanos latinoamericanos.*

‘I also see it from a historical point of view, we are a part of America that has always been subordinated to the interests of the other continents or the great part, but we are also united as Latin American brothers/sisters.’

A couple of ideas stand clearly at the core of the concept of Latin America seen from within, all of which can be related to the notion of a spiritual brotherhood/sisterhood of countries, despite difference, which can allow these countries, battered by colonial and neo-colonial oppression, to conquer their challenges. In this line, I propose an explication of the concept of *América Latina* as a cultural keyword in the region by adopting the methodology of reductive paraphrase proposed in the NSM theory (see 2.3).

[A] Semantic explanation of *América Latina*

- a. a very big place
  - there are many countries [m]<sup>1</sup> in this place
  - there are people of many kinds in this place
- b. many bad things happened before to the people in this place
  - many bad things can happen to the people in this place now
- c. people here are not the same
  - at the same time they think like this:
    - “we [m] are like brothers [m], we [we] are like sisters [m], we [m] are one”
    - good things can happen if people here think like this
    - people in this place can do many good things if they think like this
- d. countries [m] in this place can do many good things if they think like this

In this semantic explanation, section (a) captures the idea of diversity, the fact that the term covers a big geographical area containing many different countries with different peoples. Section (b) alludes to the negative geopolitical situation of the region, plagued by the wound of colonial past and the continuous threat of external interference. Section (c) focuses on the fact that community and brotherhood/sisterhood can give the people in the region strength and, finally, (d) stresses the fact that not only people, from a rather personal point of view, but also countries, i.e. from an institutional point of view, can profit from presenting a common front. In the next section, I will compare this understanding of the term with the one presented by Danish learners.

#### 4. Latin America and the teaching of Spanish in Scandinavia

Spanish is one of the most popular foreign languages in the school system in Denmark, as well as in Europe, surpassing previously well-established foreign languages like German or French (Cabau 2009; Fernández 2009). Izquierdo (2014) suggests that this popularity can hardly be explained by the role of the Spanish language in Europe, where Spain does not occupy a particularly prominent political or economic role. Rather, he attributes the interest for Spanish by young people to a growing fascination for popular culture, especially football, film and music, as well as an interest in the diverse cultures represented in the many Latin American countries, including the opportunities for doing relief work in those countries.

Languages are “windows to the world” (Danish Ministry of Education 2003), and the importance of Spanish as a foreign language subject in the Danish educational system is precisely related to the vast world that the language opens a window to. Exploring the vast Spanish-speaking world can allow young Scandinavian learners to go beyond the more or less well-known European reality (let us remember that over 90% of native Spanish speakers in the world live outside Europe) and gain access to other ways of living and thinking (global competence). At the same time, the subject has the potential to contributing to political education and critical cultural consciousness (Byram 1997) by

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<sup>1</sup> In the NSM methodology, [m] refers to a “semantic molecule”, a concept less basic than a semantic prime, but which has been explicated or can be explicated by reductive paraphrase. For instance, ‘country’ has been explicated by Goddard (2020).

introducing Danish students to important aspects of world history, including European imperialism and unequal global power relations, provided that this potentiality is exploited in class.

As mentioned in the introduction, it is usual in Denmark to construct the teaching of Spanish around the idea of two blocks: Spain and Latin America, which I assign to a Eurocentric perspective. Not only do we have a block consisting of only one country against a grouping of at least 18 countries (with Spanish as official language), but also the block on Spain is normally presented before the other areas and takes up more time/space than the rest. Besides, in this dual division, there are Spanish-speaking regions in the world outside Europe and America, which are completely overlooked (e.g. Equatorial Guinea in Africa, the Philippines in Asia and even the Spanish speaking areas in the United States), giving a somehow blurred picture of the colonial expansion of the Spanish language around the world. This situation is particularly clear in the textbooks available for Spanish and to a lesser degree in the official curricula from the Ministry of Education. In the latter, there has been a development towards a more global approach. Figure 1 shows a gradual movement away from the idea of the centrality of Spain and the two blocks. The curricula from 2003 and 2017 correspond to upper secondary school and the one from 2019 belongs to lower secondary school (where Spanish is a very recent inclusion as an elective subject). The 2017 curriculum for upper secondary school is still in force.



Figure 1. *Development in the conceptualization of the Spanish-speaking world in Danish official curricula*

#### 4.1. Latin America in teaching materials used in Denmark and Scandinavia

A number of studies have targeted the presentation of content related to Latin America in both beginner textbooks (Eide & Johnsen 2006; Pozzo & Fernández 2008; Hansejordnet 2012; Eide 2012, 2014; Barchmann 2013; Risager 2018) and more advanced single-topic learner books (Mortensen 2018). Roughly, they coincide in noticing a general tendency to present Latin America as an exotic, strange place, which is difficult to define (Eide & Johnsen 2006). Latin American people are defined as “the other” and presented through European eyes, either by Scandinavian or Spanish travelers. They do not normally have

a voice of their own and when they are allowed to speak themselves, it is often through interviews where a European asks the questions and thereby sets the agenda (Eide 2014).

As regards representation, as was mentioned before, Spain gets most of the space (more book chapters) and only a handful of Latin American countries get a book chapter for themselves – often with stereotypical topics such as the Day of the Dead for Mexico or tango and football for Argentina (Eide 2014). A quite interesting phenomenon is the predilection by several textbooks for presenting the area through maps in the cover and back cover (Pozzo & Fernández 2008; Fernández 2019). In all cases, the scale of the maps is different, showing Spain in a disproportionate size and with a bigger level of granularity. Figure 2 shows the maps presented in the cover (Spain) and back cover (Latin America) of the widely used textbook *Caminando* (Clausen et al. 2009). Besides the uneven scaling and the different amount of information present in each of the maps, it is striking to notice that the map of Latin America is visually dominated by the presence of Brazil, which is not a part of the Spanish-speaking world, whereas the world's biggest Spanish-speaking country, Mexico, does not even fully fit into the map. Of course, the millions of Spanish speakers dwelling in the United States are not represented, and the same applies to Spanish-speakers in Africa and Asia. At the same time, these cartographic representations of the Spanish-speaking world contribute to veil the fact that other languages and other peoples coexist in the same space, and this applies to Spain as much as to the American continent.



Figure 2. Cartographic representation of the Spanish-speaking world in the textbook *Caminando* (Clausen et al. 2009)

Eide (2014) observes that the concept of Latin America as a cultural construction is never problematized in the textbooks, which adopt an encyclopedic approach to concrete facts about the area. According to Eide, this gives little room for dialogue and critical reflection, and makes readers passive receivers of information. Risager (2018) also notices in her analysis of the above mentioned *Caminando* the lack of a post-colonial approach (e.g. the word *postcolonial* is never mentioned) but the indirect presence of a North/South hierarchy in the figure of a Dane doing volunteer-work in Nicaragua (i.e. the rich North helping the poor South). According to Risager, the book is apolitical and fails to deal with difficult issues such as war, exploitation or social reform and thus “does not contribute to a postcolonial understanding of the Spanish-speaking areas in the world” (Risager 2018: 179). Mortensen (2018) analyses five thematic books that are used in Denmark from the second year of high school (after beginner textbooks) and observes a tendency to dwell on negative aspects of society such as drugs, gangs and mass immigration, without a historical perspective and with an “otherizing” view of the people in the region. He combines his analysis with interviews to Spanish teachers, who also admit to this tendency in their classes – a tendency they are aware of and would like to revert.

After this short presentation of how Latin America is constructed in textbooks, in the next section, I turn my attention to how Danish learners think and talk about Latin America.

#### **4.2. “Latinamerika” / “América Latina” according to Danish learners of Spanish**

In order to obtain a better understanding of how young Danes who are learning Spanish understand and think about the notion of Latin America, a similar survey to the one presented in 3.1 was conducted in Denmark. The survey was sent via e-mail to Spanish upper secondary school teachers around the country to apply in their classes, and a total of 235 answers was received: 46 from 1<sup>st</sup> grade students, 94 from 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students and 95 from 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students (Danish upper secondary school stretches over three years). The survey was administered to the students in the fall, which means that 1<sup>st</sup> graders had just chosen Spanish to be their foreign language at school (apart from English) and had just begun their Spanish classes, while 3<sup>rd</sup> graders had already had two full years of Spanish and a bit more. Tables 2 and 3 below show the number of neutral, positive, negative, and mixed replies obtained according to school year, as well as the most frequently used words. The answers were all in Danish, some of them with a few words in Spanish or in English. As in the case of the Argentinian survey, the students were simply asked to write in words or sentences what comes to their minds when they think of *Latinamerika*. The simplicity of the survey had the intention of motivating teachers to administer the survey in class, as it does not take long time to complete and as it may be an opportunity for the students to practice writing words or phrases in Spanish (they could write in Danish or Spanish). At the same time, the open-ended question avoided guiding the students’ thoughts in particular directions, which could have biased the results.

Table 2. *Classification of answers by school year*

	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Mixed
1st grade (N=46)	24%	50%	0%	26%
2nd grade (N=94)	37%	22%	10%	31%
3rd grade (N=95)	21%	14%	10%	55%
N=235				

Table 3. *Most frequent words used, divided by school year (my translation into English)*

1st grade		2nd grade		3rd grade	
Spanish	19	Food	21	Poverty/poor	31
Dance	15	Spanish	19	Gangs/bandas	17
Food	11	Dance	18	Spanish	17
Colours	8	Music	17	Culture	16
Party	8	Mexico	12	Drugs	14
Heat	7	America	11	Dance	14
Mexico	7	Salsa	11	Food	12
Music	5	Football	10	Nature	8
Football	5	Tequila	8	Music	8
People	5	Heat	8	Football	8

A quick look at the results from both tables shows a gradual decrease of positively loaded answers during the three school years. While 50% of first graders only have positive things to say about Latin America and none has an exclusively negative image, only 14% of third graders are completely positive. The ten most frequently featuring words for each year reflect a shift between first and second graders, on the one hand, where all ten words can be considered either positive (activities or features that are considered enjoyable such as “dance”, “nature” or “football”) or neutral (simple facts like “Spanish” or “Mexico”) and third graders, on the other, where we see new words on the top-ten list: “poverty”, “gangs” and “drugs”.

If we take a closer look at the results, though, it becomes clear that first graders are indeed positive towards the region, but, at the same time, they have a very superficial knowledge. Their answers are short, stereotyped and sometimes decidedly inaccurate (e.g. “flamenco” or “Real Madrid, football, España”). It would seem that, in their eyes,

the region is mostly conceptualized as an exotic holiday place with good food, music, football, beach, warmth, beautiful landscapes and friendly people. As suggested by Izquierdo (2014), this might be a reason why they have chosen Spanish as their foreign language (it is also clear from their answers that they relate the region to the Spanish language). Third graders are less positive, but they are also more thoughtful and knowledgeable, offering in some cases longer and more elaborate answers. The positive aspects they highlight are very much like the first graders', related to beautiful nature and warm people. At the same time, they seem to have acquired a very negative view of Latin American society, which they describe as plagued with poverty, corruption and drugs (very much like the lyrics in (2), a song that critiques the view of the region from outside). This can be seen, for example, in the new words, both positive and negative, that emerge in the third graders' answers (Table 4). It is interesting to notice that the words 'poor/poverty' appear 47 times in the Danish survey but only 3 times in the Argentinian survey, which is a noticeable difference even taking into account the different amount of respondents. Something similar occurs with 'drugs', only mentioned once among Argentinian respondents and over 20 times by Danes.

Table 4. *New words in third graders' answers (my translation into English)*

	<b>Positively charged</b>	<b>Negatively charged</b>
3 <sup>rd</sup> grade	happy, different, originality, kiss, smile, art, sports talent, brotherhood, magnificent, paradise, lush, unspoiled, beautiful shoreline, animal species	problems, street children, violence, refugees, dangerous, human trafficking, border conflict, oppression, child soldiers, terrible, indifference, primitive, favelas, neglect, sniffing, ruined, rotten, tough life, failed states

It applies for all the students, regardless of school year, that it is not totally clear from the answers that their knowledge comes from their Spanish classes alone. There are many references to popular culture that may have been acquired through exposure to different media: television, the internet and even newscasts. As these students grow older, they may be more interested in keeping informed about the world outside the classroom and that can partly explain why third graders know more about the region. For example, several students choose to highlight the qualities of Latin American women, sometimes in strongly sexist terms (e.g. 'putas', 'Phat Booty', 'big bati latina'), which can hardly come from work done in class. Nevertheless, there are also direct allusions from third graders to topics dealt with in class, and these topics witness a choice of teaching materials centered on conflict:

- (7) *Først og fremmest tænker jeg på fattige lande med meget vold, stoffer og bander. I den forbindelse har vi set flere film, som b.la. omhandler problematikkerne med migranter fra de latinamerikanske lande samt de bandeforhold, der foregår i landene. Derudover et fokus på 'la vida dura', altså hvor svært livet er, og hvordan det kan være svært at få en hverdag til at hænge sammen. Helt klart kommer jeg også i tanke om den smukke natur.*

'First of all, I think of poor countries with a lot of violence, drugs and gangs. In this regard, we have seen several films that deal with the problems of migrants from the Latin American countries as well as the situation with gangs in the countries. In addition, a focus on 'la vida dura', that is, how difficult life is and how it can be difficult to make ends meet. Clearly, I also come to think about the beautiful scenery.'

- (8) *Jeg tænker med det samme på nogle af de forløb, vi har haft om, som f.eks. gadebørn og immigration. Jeg tænker på fattigdommen vi har set på billeder og i film, som omhandler gadebørn og om hvor slemme vilkår mange børn i latinamerika har. Dette emne hænger også sammen med immigrationsforløbet, hvor vi får et billede af hvordan mange familier faktisk ikke har noget bedre at byde deres børn end at tage til et fremmed land og kultur og skal starte et helt nyt liv der. Dette er nogle af de første ting jeg tænker, som kan sættes i en større samfundssammenhæng. Ellers tænker jeg på karneval i Rio og kvindernes smukke kjoler de har på når de danser danse. Dermed forbinder jeg det også med dans og musik og en friere måde at være sammen på.*

'I immediately think of some of the modules we have had, about street children and immigration. I think of the poverty we have seen in pictures and in movies that deal with street children and about the bad conditions many children in Latin America live in. This topic is also linked to the immigration process, where we get a picture of how many families actually have nothing better to offer their children than to go to a foreign country and culture and start a completely new life there. These are some of the first things I think that can be put into a larger society context. Otherwise, I think of carnival in Rio and the women's beautiful dresses they wear when dancing. In doing so, I also associate it with dance and music and a freer way of being together.'

There are only a few references to concrete people from/related to the region in the Danish answers: some football players, Gloria (a Colombian character from the American series *Modern family*), Christopher Columbus (all of them mentioned once), and then a name that features no less than 14 times: the Colombian drug-baron Pablo Escobar (another drug-baron, El Chapo, is mentioned twice). The salience of Escobar in these students' minds can probably be explained from the success of the Netflix series *Narcos*. The

students may have had a double gateway to this show: both from their personal/family Netflix accounts and from viewings of episodes of the series in class, as Spanish teachers often choose to include these authentic popular culture materials in class, which motivate students (personal communication from Spanish teachers).

Compared to the answers obtained in Argentina, there is a striking lack of historical reflection, except for one of the third graders, who adopts a post-colonial approach in his account:

- (9) *Først og fremmest tænker jeg på en turbulent historie. Latinamerika, er præget af sin tid som koloni og mange af landene er stadig u-lande og fattige fordi de er blevet udnyttet af stor magter som Portugal, Spanien og USA (...)*

‘First of all, I think of a turbulent history. Latin America is characterized by its colonial period and many of the countries are still developing countries and poor because they have been exploited by great powers such as Portugal, Spain and the United States...’

Taking into account the tendencies that emerge from the answers, I would like to propose two explications of the term Latin America (or rather *Latinamerika*) among Danish learners of Spanish: one for the first graders who have chosen to learn Spanish but have almost not experienced any Spanish classes yet (explication [B]) and one for third graders (explication [C]).

[B] Semantic explanation of *Latinamerika* as understood by Danish first graders in upper secondary school

Many times when I think of *Latinamerika*, I can think of this place like this:

- a. a very big place
  - this place is far from Denmark [m]
  - this place is not like Denmark [m]
  - there are many people of one kind in this place
  - these people are not like us [m]
- b. when I think about this place, I can feel something good
  - when I think about the people in this place, I can feel something good

[C] Semantic explanation of *Latinamerika* as understood by Danish third graders in upper secondary school

Many times when I think of *Latinamerika*, I can think of this place like this:

- a. A very big place
  - This place is far from Denmark [m]
  - There are many countries [m] in this place
  - This place is not like Denmark [m]
  - There are many people of one kind in this place
  - The people in this place are not like us [m]

- b. When I think about this place, I can think something good,  
 I can feel something good because of it  
 At the same time, I can think something very bad,  
 I can feel something very bad because of it  
 Some people in this place are good, some people are very bad  
 Many people in this place do not live well  
 Many people in this place do not want to live in this place

In both [B] and [C] we find the idea of *Latinamerika* as a place different from Danish reality with people of a different kind. Both explications attempt to capture the idea that Latin America is seen as one big place, without clear distinctions about the diversity it contains (cf. explication [A] based on the answers by Argentinian students). [B] and [C] differ from each other in the amount of information these students have of the place (some beginner respondent are not able to produce more than a couple of words about Latin America) and in their value judgements (beginner respondents have a more positive image than the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders). [C] captures the idea that *Latinamerika* is a place where it is hard to live and where people try to escape by emigrating.

If we look at these answers in relation to the educational goal of promoting intercultural and global competence through language subjects, this goal seems only partially achieved. There is a progression in the Danish learners' answers regarding Latin America, where it is clear that they have acquired further knowledge of the region, and thereby of the Spanish-speaking world, during their high school years (cf. the first *savoir* in Byram's model, which includes knowledge about others), judging by their longer and more accurate answers. Nevertheless, the other *savoirs* are less apparent in the collected material, as none of the answers point to a closer interaction with the area (i.e. skills of interaction and interpreting are not represented in the answers apart from a single-standing statement in (9)) or a critical cultural awareness. The learners' perspective seems to be from very far away and driven by factual information that was acquired in class via teaching materials and popular culture products like films and TV programs (as shown in (7) and (8)). A merely factual approach to culture in language teaching has been described as a limitation in several studies around the world (Sercu, Méndez García & Castro Prieto 2005; Jedynak 2011) and it would seem that it is also at play here, although this statement requires further research. Risager's (2018) critique of the lack of a historically-based and politically-conscious approach in the Spanish manual *Caminando* (which by no means is an exception as regards manuals used in Denmark today) resonates in the lack of evidence of a deep understanding of the Latin American region in the received answers and the lack of any historical reflection (again, with the exception of (9)). The growing focus on societal problems in the region in 3<sup>rd</sup> graders' answers can very well relate to Mortensen's (2018) observation of a tendency to select negative topics such as drugs and gangs both in the materials used after beginner systems and by the teachers he interviewed. This predilection for taking up negative aspects of society, accompanied by a lack of historical/political/post-colonial reflection, as pointed by Risager (2018), can contribute to perpetuating in the young minds of these learners a European "coloniality of power" (Quijano 2000). Presenting European/Danish learners with the view of Latin America

held by young Latin Americans today, where cultural diversity and spiritual brotherhood of countries is at the core, as well as with the historical construction of the concept, might contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the region by Spanish learners.

## 5. Concluding remarks

After having explored the concept of Latin America from various points of view, it seems justified to conclude that the term is connected to different understandings in different contexts. We have seen that, from its origin, the term is understood in the region as the construction of a community of nations who, despite differences, need to offer a common front against external menaces by world powers, due to a shared history of colonial oppression. The term has thus a positive emotional connotation that is widely represented in the region, for example through music, and has the traits of a cultural keyword. Somewhat differently, the term is used in the context of Spanish as a foreign language in Denmark to encompass a big, distant and unknown part of the world, which then becomes simplified and evened out by dealing with it as a more or less unified whole. In this context, the contraposition of Spain and Latin America as the two components of the Spanish-speaking world seems to perpetuate colonial and Eurocentric understandings of the world and contributes to an “otherizing” approach to the area, which is mostly seen from European eyes. Scandinavian teaching materials seem to adopt this point of view, and the same can be said of other popular culture products, such as American television shows, that Danish learners are in contact with. All this can explain the conceptualization of the region by young Danish students, which seems to become more negatively loaded towards Latin American society as they advance in their secondary school years. Whether the more global approach present in the most recent official curricula in Denmark (for example, if adopted by future teaching materials) will change the way Danish learners think about Latin America and the Spanish-speaking world in general, is something that we will probably be able to answer in a few years. Nevertheless, current popular geopolitical discourses on TV and other media will continue to have an influence on young learners.

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