

# Ramón y Cajal on Castilian as a language for expressing scientific concepts

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## Abstract

This vignette presents, in English translation, an exchange of letters dated 1926 between the Spanish-American scholar Mariano Ponce y Santiuste and the father of modern neuroscience and 1906 Nobel laureate, Santiago Ramón y Cajal, on the use of Castilian Spanish as a language vehicle for the expression of science concepts, and its advantages over other modern European languages. Cajal's brief note may offer an insight into the workings of his mind in relation to externalizing his ideas, as evidenced in the richness of his published biomedical and literary works.

## Keywords

Castellano, History of Neuroscience, Mariano Ponce y Santiuste (1875-1970), Santiago Ramón y Cajal (1852-1934), Scientific Writing

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## Here is an English translation of the two letters:

Tampa, Florida (United States), 10 May 1926  
His Excellency Sir don Santiago Ramón y Cajal  
Madrid.

Most distinguished Sir,

Engaged over many years in the collection of materials for a General Dictionary of the Spanish Language, I take the liberty of bothering you in order to know your opinion on whether Castilian Spanish is a language that has in itself the necessary resources as a means for scientific expression, something that some deny, which matter I shall address in the Introduction to the aforementioned work.

As in that work I intend to cite both ancient and modern examples, and examples of scientific studies in particular, I would be grateful if you indicated which of your writings You think are most useful to this end.

Asking You to forgive such nuisance, I am delighted to lend myself at your command, your

attentive faithful servant,

Who shakes your hand,

M. Poncela

Address:

Dr. M. Poncela

3503, 12th Street

Tampa, Florida (United States)

## The 74-year-old Cajal replied:

11.6.1926

Dr. M. Poncela

My dearest Sir,

My opinion on the aptitude of the Spanish language for expressing any scientific concept is frankly affirmative. Not only owing to its wealth of expressions being superior to any other language (English and German notwithstanding), but since, by general agreement, the technical and scientific terms derived from Greek and Latin are common to all languages.

I can state that I have published more than 40 volumes of scientific works in Spanish, and I never encountered any difficulty in expressing my thoughts. By contrast, in transforming them into French or German, they have lost much of their vigour and precision, and translators often resort to the use of aggravating periphrases.

In sum, and generally speaking, any modern language can be a good vehicle for science, especially languages such as French, Italian, English, and German, which have a great literary tradition. Nevertheless, Spanish is ahead of them all, provided, of course, that one has a good command of it.

From Your faithful servant who busses your hand,

R. [Ramón]

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