

Cultural Nuances.

Right, I think it's time to talk about cultural nuances and how they impact the way people in Mexico speak!

In this section, we're gonna cover the following -

I When to use 'usted'

II All things 'ahorita'

III Mande / Cómo

IV Disculpa / Disculpe / Perdón

V Buen provecho

VI Common hand gestures

VII Albures (huh?)

When to use 'usted'

Ok, this is a tricky one, so make sure you've got that cabeza of yours screwed on tight...

'Usted' is basically a more formal version of 'tú', and it's generally used as a sign of respect.

And why is it such a tricky customer?

Well, because there are no hard-and-fast rules, that's why!

You see, 'usted' is more or less common depending on the country (or even the region!) you're in **AND** the age/personal preference of the person you're speaking to.

Sounds like a recipe for disaster, right?

But fret not, because we've put together a set of (admittedly flexible!) guidelines for when you're in Mexico!



'USTED' GUIDELINES:

1. **DO** use '*usted*' when talking to people much older than yourself, authority figures (doctors, lawyers, police officers, the President, etc.), and in **VERY** "formal" situations.
2. **SOMETIMES** use '*usted*' when speaking to people on the street. If you're both young, there's probably no need, but if you're **BOTH** fairly well-aged, I **WOULD** recommend using it (as a sign of mutual respect).
3. **DO** use '*usted*' in pharmacies, hospitals, corner shops, the supermarket, hotels, on public transport, etc., if the person in question is over 40 **OR** much older than you.
4. Also, **DON'T** be surprised if complete strangers address one another with '*tú*' on the street or in any of the above-mentioned places. Remember that the rules are flexible.
5. **DON'T** be surprised if you hear people using '*tú*' at work (shock horror!). In these cases, you'll just need to play it by ear and adapt accordingly.

RUPERT'S TOP TIP

If you're fairly young and the person you're speaking to looks slightly older than you, or you're unsure of their age, I'd use '*tú*'. You **DON'T** want to risk making them feel old.

Most millennials don't really like being addressed with '*usted*' unless it's a very formal situation.

Trust me on this one ;)

Final thoughts

The above are general guidelines - keep them in mind, but **ALWAYS** play it by ear and be ready to switch things up. I generally heard 'usted' being used less in Sayulita (a laid-back beach town) than here in Mexico City, for example.

Also, as a foreigner learning Spanish as a second language, you'll be given a bit more leeway, so there's absolutely no need to get your knickers in a twist ;)

All things 'ahorita'

Welcome to the world of 'ahorita'!

This is a **VERY** special word in Mexican Spanish, and unfortunately, there's no real English equivalent.

In fact, the nuances of 'ahorita' are pretty unique to Mexico!

If you've already leafed through the diminutive section (and if you haven't, make sure to check it out!), you'll know that 'ahorita' is the diminutive form of 'ahora' or 'now'.


BUT... it doesn't really fall under any of the "common" uses of diminutives (i.e., to talk about a small example of something, as a term of affection, or as a "softener").

So, what the heck does it mean?

Well, 'ahorita' actually refers to a more immediate now!

I know, I know... a bit of a paradox, right?

That's why it might be easier to think of it as the Spanish equivalent of 'right now' or 'right this moment'.

So, you'll hear things like - 

No puedo hablar **ahorita**, ma.

I can't speak **right now**, mom.

No puedo hablar ahorita, ma.

Ahorita voy pa' allá, nomás espérame tantito. 

I'm heading there **right this moment**, just hang on a sec.



BUT (and it's a **MASSIVE** but!) '*ahorita*' has kind of mutated over time and can now mean anything from '*in a bit*' to '*never*'.

Let's have a look at some examples -

In a sec / Right away (when talking about the future)

Ahorita se los traigo. 

I'll bring them to you **right away**.

Ahorita te mando el enlace. 

I'll send you the link **in a sec**.

Just now / A moment ago (when talking about the past)

Policía - Disculpe, ¿de casualidad vio a un joven pasar por aquí?

Señora - Sí... pasó justo **ahorita**.

Policeman - Excuse me, did you happen to see a young man pass by here?

Lady - Yes, he passed by **just now**.

In a bit / Soon / Later

Ahorita paso por ti, nomás déjame terminar de comer. 

I'll come pick you up **in a bit**, just let me finish eating.

Lo voy a hacer **ahorita**... en cuanto termine mi tarea. 

I'll do it **later**... when I've finished my homework.

Being purposely ambiguous because you don't want to do the task at hand

Mamá - Juanito, ya está la cena.

Juanito - ¡Ahorita voy! (sigue jugando video juegos)

Mom - Dinner's ready, Juanito.

Juanito - I'll be down in a sec!

Mamá - ¿Ya hiciste tu tarea, Juanito?

Juanito - Sí, ahorita la hago, ma.

Mom - Have you finished your homework, Juanito?

Juanito - Yeah, I'll do it in a sec, mom.

Paco, te tocan los trastes.

¡Ahorita lo hago!



USEFUL CHUNKS WITH 'AHORITA'

Ahorita voy. = I'm coming. ▶

Ahorita vengo. / Ahorita regreso. = I'll be right back. ▶

Ahorita no, gracias. = A way of politely rejecting something (it's being used as a "softener" here)



Ahoritita. = Yep, a diminutive of a diminutive! Wrap your head around that one!!



Ahorita mismo. = Right now (the 'mismo' adds a sense of definitiveness!) ▶

Ahorita te digo. = I'll tell you in a bit. ▶

Ahorita vemos. = We'll see in a bit. ▶

Final thoughts

As you can see, 'ahorita' has **A LOT** of different meanings and, well, you're gonna come across all of them if you ever visit Mexico!

My best advice? **REALLY** pay attention to context.

That being said, even service providers occasionally use it ambiguously, so it can definitely be a tough nut to crack.

You might sometimes just have to go with the flow...

Mande / Cómo

Have you ever not understood something being said to you in Spanish?

Or maybe there was just too much background noise (Mexico ain't exactly a quiet country, after all!).

Well, there are a couple of words you can use in these situations that'll make you sound a whole lot less gringo.

Say hello to your new pals: '¿Mande?' and '¿Cómo?' :)

Mande

Let's talk '¿Mande?' first because it's the more mexicano of the two.

'Mande' actually comes from the verb 'mandar', which means 'to order'.

And here's where things get kinda controversial!

You see, some people claim that 'mande' was first used by the indigenous peoples of Mexico to respond to their Spanish conquerors.

A way of showing their subservience, if you will.

But guess what? That theory's been **DEBUNKED**.

Yep, it's **NOT** true.

Phew!

Scholars have actually traced it back to Catalan (not sure how and why it became so popular in Mexico, but there you go!).

But yeah, a few decades ago, if a zoned-out child dared respond with a '¿Qué?', they'd generally be told (somewhat sternly!), "*No se dice qué, se dice mande.*"

It's not quite as common now, but you're still gonna hear it **A LOT** because it's a **SUPER** polite way to respond when you didn't quite catch something.

¿Cómo?

'¿Cómo?' is standard Spanish but just as popular as '¿Mande?'.

And guess what? It does the exact same job as its more Mexican counterpart.

The difference?

Well, '¿Cómo?' is a bit more informal than '¿Mande?'.

That said, in day-to-day situations, it usually gets the job done just fine.

SITUACIÓN: Un hijo y su mamá están hablando en medio de una calle ruidosa.

Mamá - ¿Tienes mucha tarea esta semana?

RUIDO DE LA CALLE...

Hijo - ¿Mande? / ¿Cómo?... ¿Qué dijiste, mamá?

Mom - Do you have much homework this week?

STREET NOISE...

Son - What? / Huh?... What did you say, Mom?



Final thoughts

'¿Mande?' is deeply rooted in Mexican culture, especially among older generations. It carries a more polite and deferential tone.

Young people in urban areas, however, are more likely to use '¿Cómo?'. It's neutral and casual, making it perfect for pal-to-pal interactions and modern speech.

Just steer clear of '¿Qué?' (or 'What?') unless you want to sound abrupt - it comes off just as blunt in Spanish as it does in English ;)

Disculpa / Disculpe / Perdón

This is another important topic!

Because you're gonna be using (and hearing!) these 3 words **A LOT**.

So, what's the deal?

Well, '*disculpa*', '*disculpe*', and '*perdón*' can **ALL** mean 'excuse me' (when getting someone's attention) and 'sorry' (when apologizing for something minor).

BUT there are some key differences...

Formality

First off, there's the issue of formality.

Here's how they stack up:

disculpa = informal (but still polite)

disculpe = formal (even more polite)

perdón = neutral

And why is '*disculpe*' more formal?

Well, it's the '*usted*' form, that's why!

So, I recommend you use it in all situations that require '*usted*' (see the '*usted*' guidelines above).



In the wild

In the wild, you're gonna come across all three words!

Which one you use mainly comes down to personal preference and/or who exactly it is you're talking to -

SITUACIÓN: Pidiendo indicaciones a una mujer mayor.

Disculpe/Perdón, ¿sabe dónde está la iglesia? ▶

Excuse me, do you know where the church is?

SITUACIÓN: Pidiendo ayuda a un joven.

Disculpa/Perdón, ¿me puedes ayudar? ▶

Excuse me, can you help me?

SITUACIÓN: Disculpándote después de haber tropezado con alguien en la calle.

Disculpe/Disculpa/Perdón, ¡no te vi! ▶

Sorry, I didn't see you!



Summary

- '*Disculpe*' is best for formal situations or with people you'd normally address as '*usted*' (elders, important people, etc.).
- '*Disculpa*' is the '*tú*' form, so it's ideal for casual interactions, especially with younger people.
- '*Perdón*' is **NEUTRAL** (and versatile!). It'll also be your go-to for **DEEP** apologies (i.e., when you've really put a foot in it) or when asking for forgiveness.

Buen provecho

There's something important you should know if you plan to dine at a Mexican restaurant.

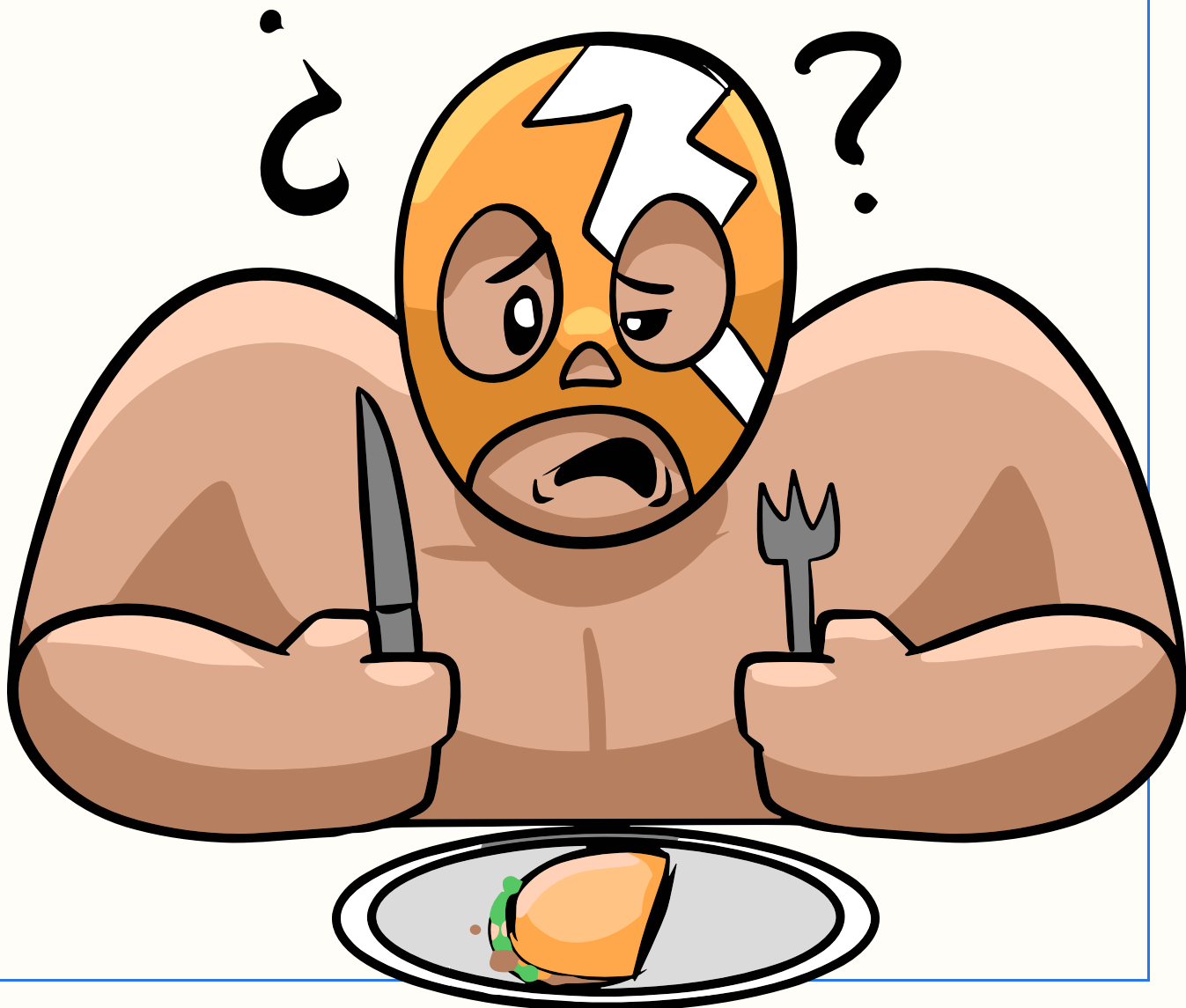
No, no, I'm **NOT** talking about how to eat a taco with a knife and fork.

That's not a thing.

I'm talking about a phrase you're gonna hear pretty much everywhere: **buen provecho**.

And trust me, it's gonna be directed your way at one point or another.

So, what does it mean, and how the hell do you respond???



Meaning of 'buen provecho' + when to actually use it

So, 'buen provecho' just means "enjoy your meal", kinda like the French "bon appétit".

BUT it's used a little differently.

I mean, you'd expect a server to say, "Enjoy your meal!", right?

But definitely not your fellow diners.

And that's where the main difference lies.

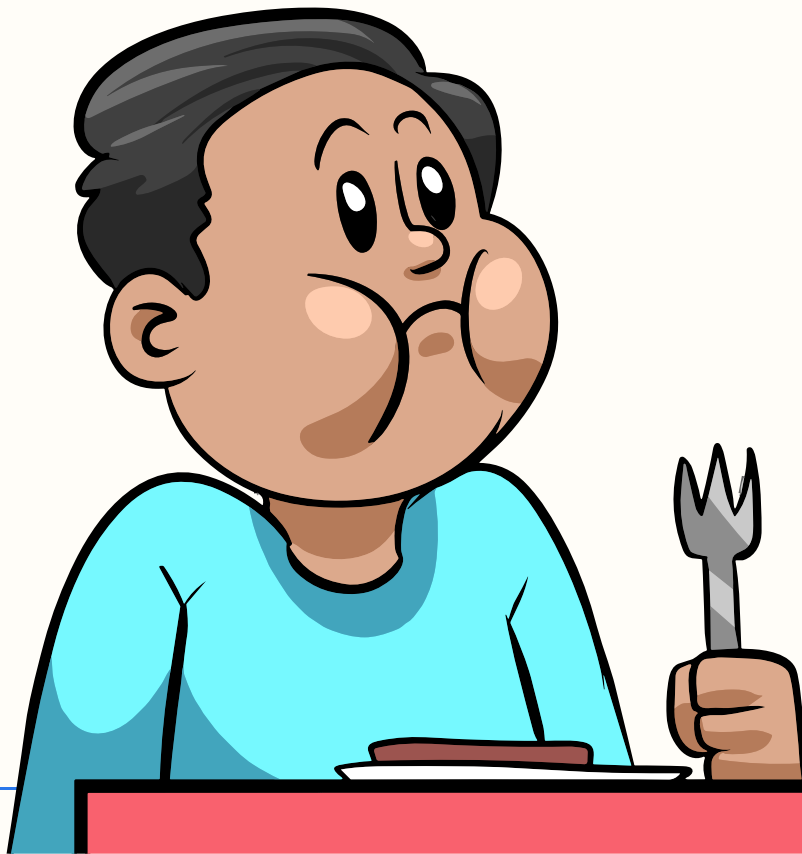
'Buen provecho' is often said to your fellow diners when you're **LEAVING** a restaurant, taco stand, etc.

Now, this isn't without controversy. Some people find it a bit annoying because it often requires a response while eating.

And that ain't always easy with a full mouth.

But there's a way around this (yippee!).

If someone tells you 'buen provecho' and you've got a mouth full of carne asada, just raise your hand to about head height with your palm facing you, and voilà, you're good to go.



Other ways to respond

Now, if you **HAVEN'T** got a mouth full of carne asada (bad luck!), it's polite to say one of the following -

Gracias, igualmente. = Thanks, you too. (if the person's still eating) 

Gracias. = Thanks. 

Alternatives

You might also hear '*provecho*' and '*provechito*' (yep, another diminutive!).

Both of these also work as responses.

And, well, that's all there is to it ;)

Common hand gestures

Hand gestures in Mexico aren't generally too different from those used in the US and Europe.

With some notable exceptions...

Saying "yes"

To say "yes" or agree to something like a true Mexican, just raise your hand and move your index finger up and down (as if it were nodding!).

In the famous Mexican TV show *El Chavo del 8*, the protagonist, El Chavo, **LOVED** doing just this - often accompanied by the phrase '*eso, eso, eso*' (which means 'exactly').

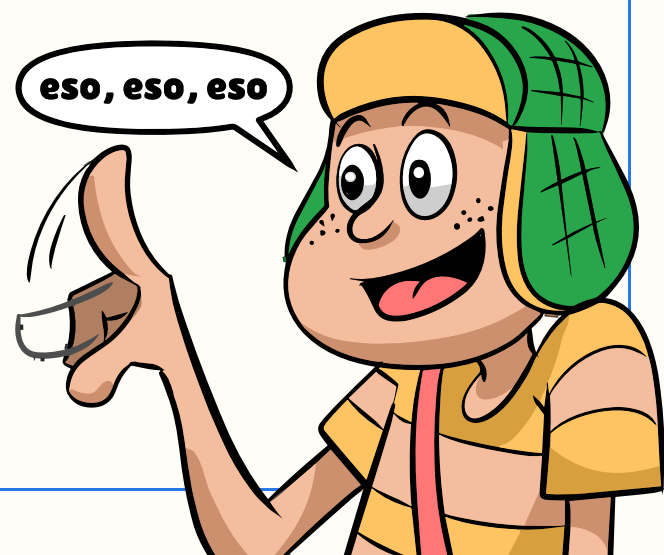
And, well, it seems to have stuck!

Saying "thank you"

To say "thank you" with a flourish, raise your hand slightly above eye level with the back of your hand facing the other person.

This is the gesture you'll often see in restaurants when you say '*provecho*' to a Mexican with a mouth full of *carne asada*.

It's also **VERY** common among drivers (and pedestrians!) - since being in a car obviously makes it hard to thank others directly!



Albures

Albures. Albures. Albures.

If you've spent much time in Mexico, you've probably heard one.

But chances are, it went way over your head.

So, what are they exactly? And why are they so darn hard to understand?

An '*albur*' (singular of '*albures*') is basically a double entendre designed to poke fun at whoever you're chatting with.

Literally **ANYTHING** can be turned into an '*albur*' - it's all about being quick-witted and creative.

There are even comedians who make a living as professional '*aburistas*', often engaging in lively showdowns (kinda like rap battles!).

I'm not going to pretend I'm an expert on all things '*albur*' - they're often so nuanced that they feel like a different language.

Here are a few examples -

A la larga te acostumbras.

Literal meaning: Over time, you get used to it.

Albur meaning: The word '*larga*' (or '*long*') is a euphemism for a certain male body part... **NO**, not the legs ;)

The phrase implies that you'll eventually get used to something long, with a humorous/suggestive/slightly sinister undertone.

No sacudas tanto el chile, que se riega la semilla.

Literal meaning: Don't shake the chili so much, or else the seeds will scatter.

Albur meaning: The word '*chile*' is a common euphemism for - yep, you guessed it - a male body part. Let's just say this might be a recurring theme...