

Common Spanish Words in Many Idioms

Certain everyday Spanish words appear in a wide range of idiomatic expressions and take on different meanings depending on context. Below we highlight some of the most common, versatile words – similar to **quedar**, **llegar**, **sí**, and **ya** – along with explanations and examples of idiomatic uses. These words are used frequently in both formal and informal speech.

Quedar

Meaning: “Quedar” basically means *to remain, stay, or be left*, but it’s extremely flexible. It’s used for making plans, expressing outcomes, or how something suits someone.

- **Quedar en + infinitive** – to agree to do something. Eg. “*Quedé en llamar mañana*” – “I agreed to call tomorrow” .
- **Quedar bien/mal** – to make a good/bad impression or to suit/fit well. Eg. “*Ella siempre quiere quedar bien con todos*” – “She always wants to make a good impression on everyone” . (For clothing: “*Esa chaqueta te queda bien*” – “That jacket looks good on you.”)
- **¿En qué quedamos?** – “So, what did we decide?” (Literally “What are we remaining on?” – used after a long discussion to confirm an agreement).
- **No quedar (le) más remedio** – to have no choice left. Eg. “*No me queda más remedio que aceptar*” – “I have no choice but to accept.”

Llegar

Meaning: “Llegar” means *to arrive or reach*, but in idioms it extends to achieving or attaining something, often with “a.”

- **Llegar a ser** – to eventually become . Eg. “*Llegó a ser director de la empresa*” – “He went on to become the company’s director.”
- **Llegar a un acuerdo** – to reach an agreement . Eg. “*Después de negociar, llegamos a un acuerdo*” – “After negotiating, we came to an agreement.”
- **Llegar a tiempo / llegar tarde** – to arrive on time / late. Eg. “*Si no llegas a tiempo, empezarán sin ti*” – “If you don’t arrive on time, they’ll start without you.”
- **Llegar lejos** – to go far (figuratively, to be successful). Eg. “*Con esfuerzo, podrás llegar lejos*” – “With effort, you can go far.”

Dar

Meaning: “Dar” means to give, but it appears in countless idioms where its meaning can shift (to produce, to hit, to yield, etc.).

- *Dar a luz* – to give birth (literally “give to light”) . Eg. “*Mi hermana dio a luz a una niña*” – “My sister gave birth to a baby girl.”
- *Dar por hecho* – to take for granted; to assume something is already done . Eg. “*Daban por hecho que ganaríamos*” – “They took it for granted that we would win.”
- *Dar con algo* – to find or stumble upon something . Eg. “*Di con la solución anoche*” – “I hit upon the solution last night.”
- *Dar igual* (or *me da igual*) – to not matter (to be all the same to someone). Eg. “*¿Café o té? Me da igual*” – “Coffee or tea? It’s all the same to me.”
- *Darse cuenta (de algo)* – to realize or notice something. Eg. “*Me di cuenta de que estaba perdido*” – “I realized I was lost.”

Hacer

Meaning: “Hacer” means to do or make, but it’s used in many idiomatic phrases conveying very different ideas.

- *Hacer caso (a alguien)* – to pay attention or heed someone . Eg. “*No le hagas caso*” – “Don’t pay attention to him.”
- *Hacer falta* – to be necessary or lacking. Eg. “*Hace falta más tiempo para terminar*” – “More time is needed to finish.” (Or “*Me haces falta*” – “I miss you / I need you,” literally “you are lacking to me.”)
- *Hacer la vista gorda* – to turn a blind eye (pretend not to notice something) . Eg. “*El jefe hizo la vista gorda a nuestras llegadas tarde*” – “The boss turned a blind eye to our late arrivals.”
- *Hacer las paces* – to make peace, reconcile with someone . Eg. “*Después de la pelea, hicieron las paces*” – “After the fight, they made up.”
- *Hacer oídos sordos* – to “make deaf ears,” i.e. to ignore something deliberately . Eg. “*Hice oídos sordos a sus quejas*” – “I turned a deaf ear to his complaints.”

Poner

Meaning: “Poner” means to put or place, but idiomatically it can imply to start, to set, to put on (emotion), etc., depending on the phrase.

- *Poner en duda* – to cast doubt on something . Eg. “*Esa coartada pone en duda su historia*” – “That alibi casts doubt on his story.”
- *Poner los pelos de punta* – to scare or horrify (literally “make one’s hair stand on end”) . Eg. “*Esa película me puso los pelos de punta*” – “That movie gave me goosebumps (scared me).”
- *Poner las cartas sobre la mesa* – to put everything on the table, to speak openly and honestly . Eg. “*Pongamos las cartas sobre la mesa y hablemos claro*” – “Let’s put all the cards on the table and speak frankly.”
- *Poner el grito en el cielo* – to scream to high heaven (to complain loudly) . Eg. “*Mi madre puso el grito en el cielo cuando vio las facturas*” – “My mother hit the roof when she saw the bills.”
- *Ponerse [adjective]* – to become/get [adjective]. Eg. “*Se puso rojo*” – “He turned red (blushed).”
(*Ponerse* often means “to become” a certain state).

Tener

Meaning: “Tener” means *to have*, but Spanish uses “tener” in many idiomatic ways to express *to be* or *to feel* states, as well as other expressions.

- *Tener prisa* – to be in a hurry . Eg. “*Tengo prisa, hablemos más tarde*” – “I’m in a hurry, let’s talk later.”
- *Tener ganas (de algo/de hacer algo)* – to feel like (doing something), to be in the mood for it . Eg. “*No tengo ganas de salir hoy*” – “I don’t feel like going out today.”
- *Tener la culpa* – to be at fault, be guilty . Eg. “*No tienes la culpa de que llueva*” – “It’s not your fault that it’s raining.”
- *Tener en cuenta* – to keep in mind, consider . Eg. “*Hay que tener en cuenta el presupuesto*” – “One must keep the budget in mind.”
- *(No) tener pelos en la lengua* – (not) to have hairs on one’s tongue, meaning to be very direct or blunt. Eg. “*Ella no tiene pelos en la lengua*” – “She’s very straightforward (doesn’t mince words).”

Echar

Meaning: “Echar” means *to throw*, but many idioms with “echar” have to do with *expelling, starting, or missing*. It’s common in everyday phrases.

- *Echar una mano* – to lend a hand, help . Eg. “*¿Me echas una mano con este mueble?*” – “Can you give me a hand with this piece of furniture?”

- *Echar de menos* – to miss someone/something (feel the lack of) . Eg. “*Te echamos de menos*” – “We miss you” .
- *Echar la culpa* – to throw blame, i.e. to blame someone else . Eg. “*Siempre me echan la culpa a mí*” – “They always put the blame on me.”
- *Echar a perder* – to spoil or ruin. Eg. “*La lluvia echó a perder el picnic*” – “The rain spoiled the picnic.”
- *Echar(se) a {infinitive}* – to start to do something suddenly. Eg. “*Echarse a reír*” – “to burst out laughing” . (Also *echar a andar* – to start walking, *echar a correr* – to start running, etc.)

Pasar

Meaning: “Pasar” generally means *to pass* or *to happen*, but in idiomatic usage it can mean *to spend (time)*, *to ignore*, or *to go through* something.

- *Pasarlo bien/mal* – to have a good/bad time (enjoy oneself or not) . Eg. “*Lo pasamos muy bien en la fiesta*” – “We had a great time at the party.”
- *Pasar por alto* – to overlook, ignore something intentionally . Eg. “*Pasaron por alto sus errores porque era nuevo*” – “They overlooked his mistakes because he was new.”
- *Pasar de [algo/alguien]* (colloquial) – to ignore or not care about something/someone. Eg. “*Paso de tus consejos*” – “I’m not interested in your advice.” In colloquial use, **pasar de** means to show complete disinterest or dismissal .
- *¿Qué pasa?* – “What’s happening?” or an informal “What’s up?”. (Here **pasar** means *to happen* – “¿Qué pasa?” is used to ask “What’s going on?” in conversation.)
- *Pasar página* – to move on (literally “turn the page” after an unfortunate event). Eg. “*Después de lo ocurrido, es mejor pasar página*” – “After what happened, it’s better to move on.”

Llevar

Meaning: “Llevar” means *to carry* or *take*, but idiomatically it often relates to *managing*, *leading*, or *getting along*. It’s also used for durations.

- *Llevar a cabo* – to carry out, execute (a plan or task) . Eg. “*El equipo llevó a cabo el proyecto con éxito*” – “The team carried out the project successfully.”
- *Llevarse bien/mal (con alguien)* – to get along well/poorly with someone . Eg. “*Me llevo bien con mi suegra*” – “I get along with my mother-in-law” .

- *Llevar la delantera* – to be ahead, lead (in competition or progress). Eg. “*En la carrera, María lleva la delantera*” – “In the race, María is in the lead.”
- *Llevar la contraria* – to contradict someone, take an opposing stance (often habitually). Eg. “*A él le encanta llevar la contraria en las reuniones*” – “He loves playing devil’s advocate in meetings.”
- *Llevar [tiempo] [gerundio]* – to have been doing something for [time]. Eg. “*Llevo dos horas esperando*” – “I’ve been waiting for two hours.” (Here **llevar** indicates the duration of an ongoing action.)

Tomar

Meaning: “Tomar” means *to take*, which can be literal (take an object, eat or drink) or figurative (adopt an attitude). Many idioms with **tomar** involve *taking on* or *deceiving*.

- *Tomar el pelo* – to tease or trick someone (literally “to take the hair”) . Eg. “*¿Me estás tomando el pelo?*” – “Are you pulling my leg?” .
- *Tomar en serio* – to take seriously. Eg. “*Debes tomar en serio tu trabajo*” – “You should take your job seriously.”
- *Tomar en cuenta* – to take into account, consider. Eg. “*Tomaremos en cuenta tu experiencia*” – “We will take your experience into account.”
- *Tomar medidas* – to take measures/actions. Eg. “*El gobierno tomará medidas contra la inflación*” – “The government will take measures against inflation.”
- *Tomar cartas en el asunto* – to take matters into one’s own hands (literally “take letters in the affair”). Eg. “*Si nadie hace nada, tendré que tomar cartas en el asunto*” – “If no one does anything, I’ll have to intervene (take action).”

Salir

Meaning: “Salir” means *to leave or go out*, but idiomatically it’s used for *turning out, emerging, or coming out* (in various senses).

- *Salir bien/mal* – to turn out well/poorly (outcome) . Eg. “*La foto salió bien*” – “The photo came out well.” (“*Todo salió mal*” – “Everything turned out badly.”)
- *Salir adelante* – to move forward, get ahead or overcome difficulties . Eg. “*A pesar de los obstáculos, saldrán adelante*” – “In spite of the obstacles, they will pull through” .
- *Salirse con la suya* – to get one’s way (impose one’s will) . Eg. “*Juan siempre se sale con la suya*” – “Juan always manages to get his own way” .

- *Salir de viaje / salir de marcha* – to go on a trip / go out partying. Eg. “*Mañana salimos de viaje a París*” – “Tomorrow we’re leaving on a trip to Paris.” (Here **salir de** indicates starting an outing.)
- *Salir a alguien* – to take after someone (in character or appearance). Eg. “*El niño salió a su padre*” – “The boy takes after his father.”

Sí

Meaning: “Sí” with an accent means yes, but it has other uses beyond a simple affirmative. It can add emphasis or appear in fixed phrases. (Don’t confuse **sí** with no accent, which means “if” or the musical note *ti*.)

- *Sí (affirmation)* – “yes.” Eg. “¿Vendrás?” “*Sí, claro.*” – “Will you come?” “Yes, of course.” In Spanish, double negatives are allowed, so “*Sí*” is the clear way to answer affirmatively.
- *Sí que...* – **sí** used emphatically before a verb to mean “really” or “indeed.” Eg. “*Él sí que sabe cocinar*” – “He really does know how to cook.” Here **sí que** adds certainty or contrast .
- *Sí o sí* – an idiomatic phrase meaning “no matter what” (literally “yes or yes”) . Eg. “*Tienes que estar aquí a las 8, sí o sí*” – “You have to be here at 8, no matter what” . (There’s no alternative — it will happen.)
- **Por sí solo/a** – by itself/on one’s own. Eg. “*El problema no se resolverá por sí solo*” – “The problem won’t solve itself.” (Here **sí** functions as a reflexive intensifier meaning “itself/oneself.”)
- **Sí** as a noun: *el sí* can mean “the yes (vote/approval).” Eg. “*Hubo más síes que noes*” – “There were more yeses than no’s.” (Used in voting or choices.)

Ya

Meaning: “Ya” is a very common adverb that usually means “already” or “now,” but its meaning varies with context . It can indicate **time** (already, now, yet), **emphasis** (“enough/already!”), or be a filler of reassurance or impatience. Some common uses:

- **Ya** (already/yet) – indicates something has happened or will happen by a certain time . Eg. “*Ya terminé la tarea*” – “I’ve already finished the homework.” “¿*Ya llegamos?*” – “Are we there yet?”
- **Ya** (now/right now) – implies “this moment”, often with a sense of urgency . Eg. “*Hazlo ya*” – “Do it now (right away).” “*¡Ven acá ya mismo!*” – “Come here right now!”
- **Ya no** – no longer, not anymore . Eg. “*Ya no vivo allí*” – “I don’t live there anymore” . The **ya** negates the continuation of something: “*Ya no queda tiempo*” – “There’s no time anymore.”

- **Ya está** – “that’s it” or “done.” Eg. “*Ya está, problema resuelto*” – “All set, problem solved.” Also **¡Ya está bien!** – “That’s enough!” (expressing that one is fed up) .
- **¡Ya era hora!** – “About time!” (Finally!) . Use this when something long-awaited finally happens. Eg. “*Ganaron, ya era hora!*” – “They won, it was about time!”
- **¡Basta ya!** – “Enough already!” – a strong way to tell someone to stop doing something.
- **Ya** (filler for emphasis or resignation) – Sometimes *ya* just adds emotional tone. Eg. “*Ya veremos*” – “We’ll see (later)” (with a tone of uncertainty or patience). Or “*¡Sí, ya, ya...*” – “Yeah, yeah (I know already)...,” indicating you’ve heard enough.

Each of these words – **quedar, llegar, dar, hacer, poner, tener, echar, pasar, llevar, tomar, salir, sí**, and **ya** – can convey different meanings in various idioms. Mastering them will greatly expand your understanding of Spanish expressions and help you sound more natural, whether you’re having a casual chat or a formal discussion. Remember that context is key: the meaning of these common words can change **ya** sea en frases hechas o en lenguaje literal (“whether it be in idiomatic phrases or literal language”). ¡Buena suerte aprendiendo!