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# 'Servicio' and 'Solidaridad' in South American Spanish

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**SUMMARY** In the context of international communication and global interaction, it becomes imperative to ask a number of questions of the terminology commonly used in the field of service. The word 'service' carries with it historical experiences and cultural contexts that differ in the English-speaking world from those of Spanish-speaking South America. The chapter considers the differences between terms like *service* and *servicio*, *caring* and *solidario*, and it becomes obvious that any attempt at direct translation gives rise to meanings or associations that may be inappropriate or lack meaning.

The chapter goes on to explore the meanings and connotations associated with terms such as *servicio*, *voluntariado*, *solidaridad* and *pro-socialidad* as well as a number

of possibilities for accurately translating the term 'civic service' into Spanish in the context of social engagement. The chapter concludes with some recommendations on the most appropriate term for 'civic service' in South American Spanish.

## Introduction

Words do not evoke the same universe of meanings in different languages or in different parts of the world. The word 'service', for example, is loaded with meanings in the English-speaking world that may be significantly different from those associated with the equivalent term in Spanish-speaking South America. These different meanings are themselves the product of multiple historical experiences and diverse cultural contexts.

In the context of international communication and global interaction, it becomes imperative to ask a number of questions of the terminology commonly used. This terminology serves as the currency for the exchange of ideas and experiences in the field of service, but it can become problematic if it is used without sensitivity to local conditions and meanings. In such circumstances language itself becomes a source of misunderstanding, misinterpretation and confusion. This chapter attempts to tease out the particular associations with some of the central terms used in the discourse of service in Spanish-speaking South America.

**Terminology serves as the currency for the exchange of ideas and experiences in the field of service**

Does *service* mean the same as *servicio*? Is *caring* the same as *solidario*? What is the most accurate translation for *civic service* in Latin America? The chapter offers some answers to these questions, considering some specific and related terms: *servicio*, *solidaridad* and *pro-socialidad*. It ends with recommendations on the most appropriate term for 'civic service' in South America.

## The meaning of 'servicio' in South American Spanish

At first sight, it does not seem that the word service has very different meanings in Spanish and English. However, a closer look reveals some interesting points:

- **A problem with the plural of *service*.** In English, 'the services' are the armed forces. In Argentina and other countries of the region, *los servicios* are the *Servicios de Inteligencia*, the Government Intelligence Agencies. For many dark years, the task of these 'services' was to spy on the political opposition and common citizens, and to decide who deserved to live and who would 'disappear'. As an extension of this association, in South American Spanish *servicios* is applied to para-military gangs, civilian informants, and illegal surveillance. Not precisely the kind of social commitment we are thinking of in civic service!
- ***Servicio* as *servitude*.** Many English expressions meaning duty or obligation are expressed in Spanish by the word *servicio*. In the lands of the former Inca Empire, Spanish landlords required Indians to give them the *servicios* that Indians

used to give to the Inca in the mines or fields: these services were mandatory, and those who dared to rebel were cruelly punished. Even today, in most South American countries *el servicio* means *the maid*. Understanding the strong connections between *servicio* and *servitude* may help to explain objections frequently raised in South American culture to the use of the word *servicio* as in *civic service*.

- **'It sounds too religious.'** Everywhere in the world, the religious duty of service defines the majority of Christian and other religious organisations, but the range and impact of services performed by religious people in South America cannot be underestimated. Where governmental agencies fail to arrive, you will surely find a priest, a *caritas* section, an evangelical chapel or a synagogue offering help. This may explain the strong identification between service and religion in the region. Why should this be a problem in an overwhelmingly Catholic land? Because agnosticism, atheism and anticlericism were widely diffused among 'illustrious classes' in the 19th century, and the separation of church and state has in the last century promoted the use of neutral language, or language without religious connotation, in the public arena. To give just one example: in 1996, when it was proposed that service-learning should be incorporated into the Argentina Federal Curriculum, the original language *proyectos de servicio comunitario* (community service projects) was finally replaced in the current official version by *proyectos de intervención sociocomunitaria* (community intervention projects) (Consejo Federal de Educación 1997).
- **'It sounds too charitable.'** The old paradigms of 'charity' and 'beneficence' are strongly rejected, because they tended to consider the disadvantaged as passive recipients of help, and failed to incorporate the values of social justice and human dignity. *Servicio* is frequently associated with charitable but rather patronising, even if well-intentioned, activities performed by the middle and upper classes.
- **'It sounds too much like military service.'** Most South American armies spent the 20th century involved in civil wars or organising coups against civilian governments. Overcoming anti-military feelings in the region will require the armed forces to demonstrate, over many years, that they can obey elected presidents and perform meaningful tasks. Meanwhile, military service is very unpopular, and the majority of young people wanting to serve their communities are unlikely to think of the military as an option.

## 'Servicio' and 'Solidaridad' – Other meanings

### 'Servicio'

It is true that the National Service Corps of both Chile and Brazil (*Servicio País* and *Serviço Civil Voluntário*) use the word *servicio*. It is also true that for many people with a religious or social commitment, *servicio* means exactly what it does in English, 'a substantial engagement and contribution to the community'. But as we have seen, that may not always be true for everyone.

In fact, the activities usually referred to as 'service' in English speaking countries, are generally defined in South America as *voluntariado* or *acciones solidarias*.

*Voluntariado* can be easily translated as *volunteering*; differences between volunteering and civic service have already been signaled (McBride et al. 2003). On the other hand, *solidaridad* is difficult to translate into English. Since it is a term hardly ever used by English-speaking scholars in relation to civic service, the use of this word merits a brief discussion.

### 'Solidaridad'

Anywhere in South America, *solidaridad* (*solidariedade* in Brazil) means working together for the common cause, helping others in an organised and effective way, standing as a group or as a nation to defend one's rights, face natural disasters or economic crisis, and to do it hand in hand. *Solidaridad* is one of the values South Americans cherish most, and it is the common flag of all the new and old volunteer organisations in our emerging civic societies.

**As service**, *solidaridad* means 'an engagement and contribution to the local, national or world community, recognised and valued by society.' (McBride et al. 2003). The term is used to define the mission of almost every civic service or national service organisation in the region, from *Opción Colombia*<sup>1</sup> to the Chilean *Adopta un Hermano*<sup>2</sup>, or it is part of the name of the organisation, as in the vast Brazilian University Service Programme *Universidade Solidaria*<sup>3</sup>, and the Argentinian Ministry of Education Service-Learning Programme, *Educación Solidaria*<sup>4</sup>.

**As volunteering**, *solidaridad* includes occasional or very structured activities: it is used for *campañas solidarias* (gathering food or clothes for the needy), or to describe structured service programmes. A Uruguay NGO's website is called *Uruguay Solidario*<sup>5</sup>, and includes information about a vast range of volunteer initiatives across the country. In fact, volunteering and *solidaridad* are frequently associated, as in the Brazilian programme *Projeto Jovem Voluntário – Escola Solidária*<sup>6</sup>.

*Solidaridad* is also associated with citizen participation, as in the Brazilian Service Corps *Programa Jovem Cidadão: Serviço Civil Voluntário*<sup>7</sup>, or in *Guía Uruguaya de la Solidaridad Ciudadana* (1998), a reference book about Uruguay NGOs.

*Solidaridad* may be used in very different contexts: you may talk of *solidaridad* among workers of a trade union, make 'a call to solidarity' asking for blood donors or social volunteers, or demand *solidaridad latinoamericana* to confront international

debt. Left-wing politicians and anticommunist dictators alike proudly use the expression.

In fact, many social leaders are concerned about a certain 'solidarity fashion' that is developing. The word risks becoming little more than an empty cliché, or a vague feeling of goodwill, when almost everyone – from TV stars to secretaries of state – is calling for *solidaridad*. As often happens with service projects, many *acciones solidarias* hardly differ from the old 'charities', and serve little purpose other than easing the server's conscience. And, as sometimes happens when social issues are incorporated into marketing campaigns, 'corporate solidarity' may also be used in an attempt to promote a better image for companies that evade taxes or pollute the environment.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the concept of *solidaridad* has deep roots in South American culture: in the communal values of native cultures, in the Christian

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message brought by missionaries who protected Indians against the Spanish conquerors, in the *fraternité* of the French Revolution that inspired the independence movements, and also in the co-operative ideas and organisations (*cooperativismo*) brought by European immigrants at the beginning of the 20th century. From a philosophical point of view, solidarity is strongly related

to the concept of fraternity (equivalent to *hermandad*: brotherhood/sisterhood), meaning that one recognises all humankind as a family, and shapes one's actions in accordance with that understanding.

Spanish *solidaridad* is easily translated into Portuguese (*solidariedade*), into French (*solidarité*), into Italian (*solidarietà*), not just literally, but also in terms of its cultural meaning. The same is true even in Polish: *Solidarnosc* was the name chosen for the first free union under the communist regime by Lech Walesa, an icon for many South American union leaders who had to struggle against military governments during the 1980s.

## Translating 'solidaridad' into English

I have to confess I was surprised the first time I discovered that the word 'solidarity' was hardly used in English, and that I was required to give long explanations about the Spanish meaning of the word. To translate *solidaridad* into English, the words *care* and *compassion* have been suggested to me. The problem is that *care* (*cuidar*) in Spanish means *attend* or *assist*, and is used for babysitting, taking care of pets, or watching cars in a parking lot. *Comasión* in Spanish means *pity*, and it sounds not only patronising, but even offensive when used for social engagement.

Language differences may also provide evidence of deep cultural divisions. A North American scholar told me once that *solidaridad* sounded like an evasion of individual responsibilities through relying on the collective. He was shocked when he learned that *individualista* in Spanish is understood as *selfish*. In fact, individual initiative and collective action have played different roles in northern and southern

history, and are valued in different ways in Anglo-Saxon and Latin cultures. From the Magna Carta to the US Declaration of Independence, 'individualism' in English evokes the defence of individual rights, the affirmation of one's mind and freedom, and admiration for 'self-made men'. In Spanish, an 'individualistic' approach to social problems sounds like a contradiction in terms: when poverty and social problems are so overwhelming, one cannot deal with them as an individual. *Solidaridad* does not mean evading individual responsibilities, but embracing them in the most efficient way: together with other people equally committed.

But it is true that in the English-speaking world, references to 'solidarity' and 'collective action' may arouse suspicions about massification or anti-democratic procedures, so we need further study and comparison of the meanings and social constructions in our languages, and to look for common ground to build civic service categories of analysis.

## Service, 'solidaridad' and pro-sociality

There is already a common, helpful term to build a bridge between English service and Spanish *solidaridad*: 'pro-sociality' is an academic concept used both in English and Spanish to refer to engagement for the common good (Staub, Bar-Tal, Karylowsky & Reykowsky 1983).

'Pro-social behavior' is defined by psychologists as 'those actions that tend to benefit other people without the prospect of external personal benefit', or 'those behaviours that, without any prospect of external reward, favour other people, groups or social objectives, and increase the probability of generating a positive reciprocity which will in turn promote solidarity in the resulting interpersonal and social relationships, while safeguarding the identity, creativity, and initiative of the individuals or groups involved' (Roche-Oliver 1998).

**'Pro-sociality' is an academic concept used both in English and Spanish to refer to engagement for the common good**

According to Roche-Oliver, it is very important to understand the difference between pro-sociality and altruism. While altruism is a subjective concept, defined by the intentions of the subject, not by the actual results of the action, pro-sociality is an objective concept, defined by the effective satisfaction of the recipient of the action. It is possible to associate occasional volunteering with altruism, while structured, intensive civic service programmes require a more pro-social approach.

In pro-sociality theory, reciprocity and justice are key words to build pro-social relationships. Like *solidaridad*, pro-sociality tends to overcome the usual power differentials established in the donor/recipient relationship, distancing itself from patterns of beneficence or patronage. Pro-sociality models help to measure to what extent people, groups or social objectives have been favoured or not, to assess the impact of the service provided, and evaluate whether reciprocity has been generated or not.

Peace Corps or *Zivildienst* activities may be studied using pro-social categories of analysis. The same is true for service-learning: when United States teachers tell their students to 'care' about the homeless or the environment, and Argentina teachers promote *proyectos solidarios*, they are all teaching pro-social behaviours and values.

In *National Service and Pro-sociality*, Donald Eberly, President of the International Association of National Youth Service, and Roberto Roche-Olivar, Professor in Pro-sociality at the Barcelona University, affirm that:

There is a high degree of overlap between the aims of pro-sociality and service-learning. A major aim of pro-sociality is to have students become service-oriented. A major aim of service-learning is to have students acquire pro-social values, attitudes and behaviours.

Service-learning can strengthen pro-sociality by demonstrating a pro-social commitment on the part of the school. Whether or not values are in the curriculum, the school teaches values by its actions and policies, e.g. spending a lot of money on sports. Thus, a school that has a service-learning programme sends the message to students that the school cares about the community and the environment.

Pro-sociality can also be strengthened by the experiential nature of service-learning. Students retain a much higher percentage of what they learn from experience as compared with what they learn from listening in the classroom and reading books (Eberly & Roche-Olivar 2002).

Pro-sociality studies are being developed in very different cultural contexts, such as the United States, Spain, Italy, the Czech Republic and South America. It may be interesting for the civic service field to take advantage of this multi-cultural theoretical approach to foster its own research and discussion.

## Translating 'civic service' into Spanish

While there is clearly a need for further research and analysis, any preliminary proposal to express the meaning of 'civic service' in Spanish should consider these alternatives:

- *Voluntariado* in Spanish includes both occasional volunteering and intensive programmes described in English as civic service. It is an umbrella term that must be taken in consideration, but it does not help much in an effort to be precise.
- *Servicio Civil* in South America Spanish means *Public Service*, and it is associated in most countries with careers in the federal administration, so it would not be a good translation for civic service.
- *Servicio ciudadano* (citizen service) is a better translation, but still leaves room for confusion with professional Public Service, and it does not clearly define 'service'.

- *Servicio solidario* expresses more clearly the meaning of service than *servicio* alone, but it may be confused with volunteering. As *voluntariado*, it may include occasional activities as well as structured, full-time service.

So, we propose *servicio ciudadano solidario* as the best translation into Spanish of civic service. We think it shows committed citizenship and is more specific about the kind of pro-social service we want to encourage.

## Conclusion

We are all aware that globalisation has many different faces. Global communications have helped stimulate international awareness and co-operation on social issues in the most distant points of the planet, but globalisation is also seen as a modern version of the Roman Empire: one hegemonic language and one powerful *Imperator* imposing one culture over all others.

As a new and emerging field of knowledge, the language and categories of analysis of civic service are still to be established. A better understanding of cultural and linguistic differences related to service and volunteering may be crucial in order to build a global, multicultural field of studies that contributes to what John Paul II has called 'the globalisation of solidarity'.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> [www.opcioncolombia.org.co](http://www.opcioncolombia.org.co).
- <sup>2</sup> [www.adoptaunhermano.cl](http://www.adoptaunhermano.cl).
- <sup>3</sup> [www.universidadesolidaria.org.br](http://www.universidadesolidaria.org.br).
- <sup>4</sup> [www.edusol.me.gov.ar](http://www.edusol.me.gov.ar).
- <sup>5</sup> [www.uruguaysolidario.org.uy](http://www.uruguaysolidario.org.uy).
- <sup>6</sup> [www.facaparte.org.br/site/projetos](http://www.facaparte.org.br/site/projetos).
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