

» Have the interpreter conceal his identity upon arrival and stand near the subject's vehicle to "watch" over him. If the subject talks to you in Spanish, just play dumb. In reality your interpreter becomes your intel gatherer. Once useful information has been obtained, allow the interpreter to identify himself. Photo: Sean Utley

» BY ABNER MIRANDA

POLICE INTERPRETER 101

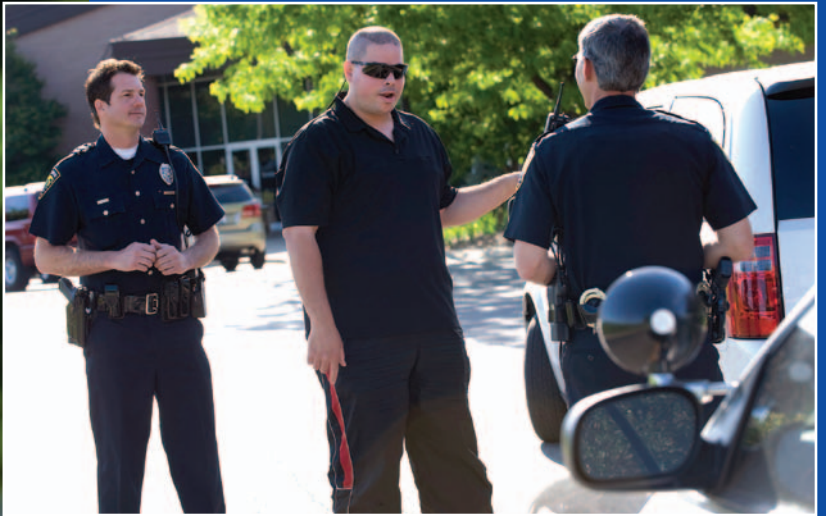
The judge cleared his throat and called for the next defendant.

"Mr. Jimenez," he began. "Sir, do you understand the charges against you?" A vacant look followed. "How do you plead, sir?" Mr. Jimenez just stared back blankly. The Judge then asked if he understood the words that were being spoken to him. Mr. Jimenez looked embarrassed and stam-

mered in broken English, "I no speaky goot Englis." As my agency's only Spanish interpreter, it was time for me to get to work.

As a native of Puerto Rico, it means that I was blessed at birth with citizenship to this country that I so love. My creed is "Puerto Rican by birth, American by the Grace of God." My

family came to America when I was two years old. From the get-go, our folks prompted my two brothers and me to speak only English. They knew that English would be required to get ahead. We read everything in sight that was written in English, which back then was just about everything. There were no politically correct "Se



Interpreters stand behind the subject while interviewing the officer. In this way, the interpreter divides the subject's attention, making an attack on the primary officer less likely. Photo: Sean Utley



Should the subject decide to attack the primary officer, the interpreter can quickly transition into a supportive role. Photo: Sean Utley



Notice how U.S. Border Patrol takes a similar stance of distance and division of attention. Look closely and you'll see a third officer standing to the side just in case. Photo: U.S. Border Patrol

OVERCOMING LANGUAGE BARRIERS



If takedown is warranted, your back-up is already on scene and on task. Photo: U.S. Border Patrol

LEOs have to deal with illegal immigrants who may not be educated and thus are incapable of reading even a simple form like the Miranda warning. This is when having access to an interpreter is crucial. Photo: U.S. Border Patrol



Habla Espanol" signs at businesses stating that they speak Spanish. Nor were there any double-sided instruction manuals for products. Back then if you chose to enter this country, you needed to learn English real quick.

We spoke it in our home and had it mastered in short order. Our mother would read to us from the *Reader's Digest* to improve our family's command of the English language. As is

usually the case, children learn a new language before their parents do. My brothers and I would listen intently to every word our parents spoke, quickly correcting mom's mispronunciations.

Why am I telling you all this? As a Hispanic-American, I don't care for the troublemakers of my race who come to America to raise hell and force those around them to acquiesce to their needs. It seems that more and

more of our time as peace officers is spent protecting the streets from these vermin. The sign "Se Habla Espanol" makes me want to pull my hair out. I think it should read "Aquí Solamente Se Habla Ingles," which means "Here We Only Speak English."

In law enforcement, interpreters are a rare and underappreciated breed. It's because we speak the "taco" language. It's hard to accept this type of

sentiment from your fellow officers. It stems from their frustration with depending on others to help them do their job. Seven out of ten times when an interpreter shows up, the waiting officer has been raked across the coals by the suspect, who can actually understand English but is playing ignorant just for kicks and giggles. We've had suspects laugh at us when they realize that we've caught them playing the "No hablo Ingles" routine. We ask them, "Habras INS?" This usually gets their attention and wipes the stupid smile off their face. As interpreters our job is simple: cut through the lies and ID the subject.

Often the subject thinks you're going to go soft because you're their "hermano" (brother) countryman. "You can just park it right there," I say to them. "I'm not your bother, I'm his," pointing at my fellow officer. I then set out to discover just what their level of English fluency is.

Often the suspect can understand English fairly well, but can't speak it easily. It's like looking in a mirror and having to draw a picture of yourself. You know what you look like, so why can't you draw yourself? It's because your brain has to do a task that it doesn't often have to do—it needs time and practice. I have the same problem with thinking in English and interpreting my thoughts into Spanish. It comes from speaking primarily English all my life.

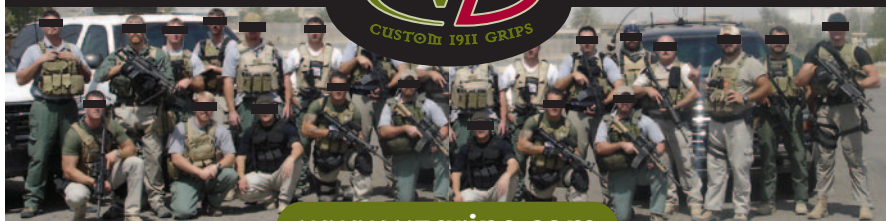
The Spanish language is 30% larger than English, so if the English speaker is running at 100 mph, the interpreter must go 130 mph just to keep up. Now imagine that "Sgt. Ulcer" is questioning "Paco" at a feverish pace, I mean he's going at it like Tommy Lee Jones in *The Fugitive*. You can get a migraine trying to keep up with that kind of volume. Not to mention that interpreting on the street involves the stress of weapons being thrown into the mix. Remember, no matter how thoroughly you may have searched the subject, there is always at least one weapon present—yours.

A friend of mine recently graduated from an LEO Spanish Survival School and got a first-hand lesson on the pit-

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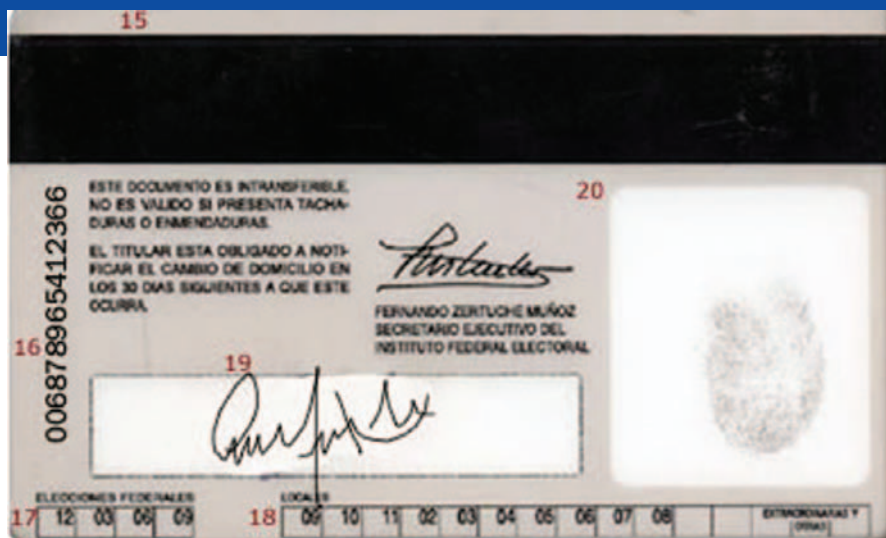


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How many times have you been handed one of these as a DL? This is not what you think. This is a "Mexican Voter's ID Card." Here is how to tell. There are several words on this card that are cognates, words that have similar meaning in two different languages. For example, Instituto = Institute. Federal and Electoral are spelled the same in both Spanish and English and have the same meaning as well. By those three words alone, you can see that this is indeed a "Federal Institute of Elections" ID card, and certainly not a driver's license.

Even the backside of one of these IDs looks like a DL. Don't be fooled. Listen to your gut and call your interpreter.



falls of the phonetic similarities among words in Spanish. During a felony stop, he inadvertently told the subject, "Take your nuts out and spank them on the ground!" instead of "Take the keys out and throw them on the ground!" By interchanging one word, he completely threw off the meaning of the sentence. The word in question was *llaves* (pronounced "yavess"), which means "keys." He replaced it with *huevos* (pronounced "wevoss"), which means "eggs" but is the common slang for "nuts." Yeah buddy! That sort of mistake would throw any officer for a loop. While I'm sure my friend was embarrassed beyond all belief, the reality is that either way, the car would get stopped. As for the temper of the driver, that really would depend on his sense of humor.

Though Hispanic criminals love to play dumb, they're far from it. You'll often catch them communicating in the open with each other before they know that you can speak Spanish too. The best thing you can do for yourself as an officer is not let on that your interpreter is exactly that—an interpreter. We can glean useful info by just listening.

If your interpreter has been in this country their whole life, you are doubly blessed, because they can speak without an accent in either language and they probably look Caucasian too. It's priceless to watch the expressions on the suspects' faces when they're chattering back and forth about the

hidden drugs, then you say something in perfect Spanish to them. Gotcha!

As police interpreters, we try to keep up with the latest bulletins affecting our craft. Recently it has come to light that Middle Eastern males are in growing frequency being caught entering America through Mexico. It really isn't that hard to do, considering how few agents are available to cover our massive borders. These illegal aliens are known by Immigrations Customs Enforcement (ICE) as OTMs (Other Than Mexicans). A couple thousand bucks, a Coyote guide and "Tadah!" Welcome to America.

It was disturbing to come across this not only in law enforcement magazines and alert bulletins, but also in a Tom Clancy book called *The Teeth of the Tiger*. As a line from the book reads, "If you're going to sneak up behind a tiger and kick him in the ass, you'd bet-

ter be ready to deal with his teeth." We all know what the "tiger" represents. Al Qaeda wants in badly, which means that we can't slack off on the job.

For a trained Al Qaeda operative whose only job is to learn Spanish, believe me, he can get it done PDQ. Surprisingly, Spanish and Arabic are not that dissimilar in pronunciation. The words for some common everyday things are identical in both languages.

Also, fake IDs and passports with perfect holograms are readily available and are showing up everywhere. A trend we are seeing is the "international driver's license." There is no such animal. The real deal is called an IDP (International Drivers Permit). It does not replace a DL from the driver's country, so he'd better produce both for you. The IDP is a small grey booklet translated into ten different languages. The driver's info is hand-

written, not typed. The driver's photo is affixed inside the flap of the last page and it *never* says "license" on it anywhere. If you are ever handed an international driver's "license," it's a fake!

Also, if you find the phrase "Credencial Para Votar" on an ID card, you are looking at a Mexican voter registration card and not a Mexican DL. If you get that weird feeling in the pit of your stomach, don't ignore it. Call dispatch and have them run an IAQ (Immigration Alien Query). They can contact DHS-ICE at 802-872-6020 to see if Paco is indeed Paco or actually Mohamed.

IDs are one thing, but accents are another, because they can betray your cover. Terrorists can shave their beards and tan to pass as Mexican or South American, but if they've learned their Spanish in Europe, a trained interpreter can hear it. In the same way that you can hear the difference between New York and Texas accents, we can hear the subtleties of European Spanish as opposed to the Tex-Mex Spanish that comes from regions south of our borders.

Remember, if the individual you're dealing with claims to be from Europe, he's going to have all his documentation with him if he's legit. If he can't give you hard data to dispel your suspicions, hook 'im and let DHS-ICE sort it out. You may just end up catching a big fish for them.

Last year I assisted in arresting a Hispanic male who had some methamphetamine on him. We thought we'd caught a run-of-the-mill illegal. Instead, ICE gave the officer an "Atta-boy!" It turns out that our subject was a major player and ICE had been looking for him for quite some time. Coincidentally he was caught trying to pass a voter registration card off as a DL. Whoops!

"Welcome to America, buddy. Turn to the right!" ●

[Abner Miranda is currently a patrolman for Signal Mountain Police Department in Tennessee. He is a Spanish interpreter, an FBI trained Hostage negotiator, and an AR-15 and Glock armorer. We welcome him to S.W.A.T. and look forward to his future contributions.]



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