

Subject Pronouns in Spanish

They work similarly in English as they do in Spanish

But what does “subject pronoun” mean?

Pronouns are **words that refer to other people (or things) without having to say the whole word.**

Here’s an example in English:

David ate a hot dog. Afterwards, David ate a hamburger. Then, David ate some corn on the cob. David was very hungry.

Obviously, it’s weird that the word “David” is said so many times. Normally, we try to speak a bit faster, so instead of saying “David” after the first time we say “David”, we would normally say “he”, like this:

David ate a hot dog. Afterwards, he ate a hamburger. Then, he ate some corn on the cob. He was very hungry.

So that’s what “pronoun” means. Now what about “subject”?

In grammar, when we say “subject” we mean **the person or thing doing the action of the sentence.**

In the previous example “David” was the *subject*. **He’s** the one eating the hot dog, hamburger, and corn on the cob.

So, to put it all together, **subject pronouns are shortened words that we use to talk about the person or thing in a sentence that is doing the action of the sentence.**

Subject pronouns in English encode for point-of-view and number¹

In English and most other languages, subject pronouns have bits of information on them to show us who the person is in relation to the speaker. Since I’m not David, I can say “he” instead of “I”. This is because “he” is the third person singular subject pronoun in English. We have two of those.

First-person

These are words that tell us the *speaker* is involved in the action, like **“I” or “We”**. The only difference between “I” and “We” is that “We” is plural.

Second-person

Second-person is all about **“you”**. In English, that’s about as complicated as it gets.

Third-person

The third-person is someone who isn’t *me* and who isn’t *you*: it’s **“he”, “she”, “they”, and, “it”**.

¹ They also encode for gender in certain cases. More on that later!

Subject pronouns in Spanish have a bit more going on

In the following two pictures, Woodward shows us how subject pronouns work in English and in Spanish. For the most part, they work the same way, **with a few exceptions**.

Exception one: Spanish pronouns have more **gender** information than English pronouns

In English, we only encode for gender when we differentiate between “he” and “she”. However, if we look at the two pictures below, we see that on the left picture, there’s only one **we** and one **they**. But in Spanish, there’s **two** for each: “nosotros” and “nosotras”, “ellos” and “ellas”. In Spanish, an -o ending on a pronoun means that it’s **masculine**, whereas an -a means it’s **feminine**.

Look through the two pictures and try to find what’s different between English and Spanish subject pronouns.

English	Spanish
I Singular	YO Singular
WE Plural	NOSOTROS Plural (Masculine) NOSOTRAS Plural (Feminine)
YOU Singular	TÚ Singular
YOU Plural	VOSOTROS Plural (Masculine) VOSOTRAS Plural (Feminine)
HE Singular	ÉL Singular (Masculine)
SHE Singular	ELLA Singular (Feminine)
IT Singular	ELLOS Plural (Masculine) ELLAS Plural (Feminine)
THEY Plural	

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*notice that there’s no equivalent for “it” in Spanish

Spanish pronouns also have formality

In many of the world's languages, humans communicate formality through our word choice. Formality is the idea that when we talk to people we respect, our language **actually looks different**. In Spanish, this looks like a different word for *you*.

In English, *you* is *you* is *you* is *you*, whether it's plural, formal, singular, or informal.

In Spanish, though, we have to be careful about *you*. (This is outlined in page 43-45 of your textbook)

Spanish Subject Pronouns

		Singular		Plural	Gender
1sr Person	<i>I</i>	Yo	<i>We</i>	Nosotros	masculine
				Nosotras	feminine
2nd Person	<i>You, informal</i>	Tú	<i>You</i>	Ustedes	masculine and feminine
	<i>You, formal</i>	Usted			
3rd Person	<i>He</i>	Él	<i>They</i>	Ellos	masculine
	<i>She</i>	Ella		Ellas	feminine



In the above table, the English words are in blue, and the Spanish words are in red.

Do you notice how there's **three different words** that mean "you" in Spanish?

These words are *tú*, *usted*, and *ustedes*.

- *Tú* is for when you're talking to your friend, or someone else in an **informal context**.
- *Usted* is the *you* you use when you're talking to someone of higher status than you, or someone you respect, people like **your teacher** or **your boss**.
- *Ustedes* is the *you* you use when you're talking to a group of people. Think of *ustedes* as equivalent to *y'all* in the American South or *you guys* in American English.²

² As the above pictures illustrate, there's another word, *vosotros*, that is used for *y'all* or *you guys* in a few Spanish-speaking countries. This word is not typically tested on or used in the Americas.

Summary

Subject pronouns in Spanish operate mostly the same way as they do in English. We're still talking about words that tell us *who* is doing the action of the sentence, and how they relate to the speaker. There are, nevertheless, a few exceptions that make Spanish subject pronouns special.

First, Spanish subject pronouns encode for gender more often than English ones do. There are two **We**'s and two **They**'s in Spanish, one for masculine and one for feminine.

Second, Spanish subject pronouns encode for formality, or the social relationship between the speaker and the listener. While there's only one way to say "you" in Standard American English, there are at least three (if not five) ways to say "you" in Spanish. These are *tú*, *usted*, and *ustedes*.

This is more complicated than English's system, but, like everything, it gets easier with practice! And you might even find that higher level of specificity is useful in conversation.