

Verbs: The Words That Keep Spanish Moving



Nouns give us people, places, and things. Adjectives describe them. But sooner or later, somebody has to **do something**.

That's where verbs come in.

hablar - to speak
comer - to eat
vivir - to live
correr - to run
pensar - to think
amar - to love

Without verbs, language would be little more than a collection of labels. Verbs put those labels into motion.

Spanish Verbs Work Harder Than English Verbs

English verbs certainly change: *I speak. She speaks. We spoke. They will speak.*

But Spanish verbs do considerably more changing. Their endings can tell us **who is doing something, how many people are doing it, when they're doing it, and sometimes even how the speaker feels about it.**

Take the verb **hablar** - to speak.

Hablo. - I speak.
Hablas. - You speak.
Hablamos. - We speak.
Hablaron. - They spoke.
Hablaré. - I will speak.

Notice something else. We don't need **yo, tú, nosotros, or ellos** in those examples. As we learned in our discussion of subject pronouns, the verb ending frequently tells us who's doing the action.

A Spanish verb can pack a surprising amount of information into one word.

Person: Who's Doing It?

Grammarians divide verbs into three "persons." Don't let the terminology scare you. It's simpler than it sounds.

First person: I or we
Second person: you
Third person: he, she, they - or anybody or anything you're talking about

Each can also be **singular or plural**. That's why Spanish verbs have different endings. The ending helps identify who's doing the action.

Tense: When Is It Happening?

Verbs also travel through time.

Hablo. - I speak.
Hablé. - I spoke.
Hablaba. - I was speaking / I used to speak.
Hablaré. - I will speak.

Past, present, and future sound simple enough. But Spanish gives us several ways of talking about the past, and each can shade the meaning differently.

That's something worth studying later. For now, simply recognize that **changing the verb can move an entire sentence through time.**

And Then Verbs Get Moody

Spanish verbs don't merely have **tenses**. They also have **moods**. A mood tells us something about the speaker's attitude toward what's being said.

The **indicative** deals mainly with facts and ordinary statements:

María viene.
María is coming.

The **subjunctive** enters the picture when we're dealing with such things as wishes, doubts,

emotions, possibilities, and uncertainty:

Espero que María venga.

I hope María comes.

And the **imperative** gets right down to business:

¡Ven!

Come!

Fact. Possibility. Command. Same basic idea of *coming*, but the verb changes according to what the speaker wants to communicate.

Don't Try to Learn Everything at Once

Open a Spanish grammar book to a page filled with verb conjugations and you may be tempted to close it again. Don't.

Spanish verbs are highly organized. Most belong to one of three families:

-ar verbs: hablar, trabajar, estudiar

-er verbs: comer, aprender, beber

-ir verbs: vivir, escribir, abrir

Learn how the regular members of each family behave and you've learned the pattern for thousands of verbs.

Yes, there are irregular verbs. Some of the most useful Spanish verbs seem particularly determined to misbehave. We'll deal with those when we meet them.

For Now, Remember This

A Spanish verb is much more than an action word. Its ending can tell you:

who is doing something,

how many are doing it,

when it happens,

and sometimes how the speaker regards it.

That's a lot of work for one little word.

So when you encounter Spanish verb conjugations, don't think of them as endless tables of endings to memorize. Think of them as a system for packing information into the verb.

Learn the patterns a little at a time, and those intimidating conjugation charts begin to make sense.

After all, verbs are the words that keep Spanish moving.