En una palabra, Córdoba, Argentina:
A CD-ROM for Exploring Culture in Spanish

Reviewed by

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PRODUCT AT A GLANCE

Product Type:
Instructional software with emphasis on listening skills and culture

Language(s):
Argentinean Spanish (Central Argentinean Variety—Córdoba)

Level:
Intermediate-advanced; adult

Activities:
Cultural listening comprehension (native voice speech samples) and vocabulary learning

Media Format:
1 CD-ROM

Operating Systems:
Windows 98, 2000, XP; Macintosh Power Mac G3 with OS 10.1.5 or later

Hardware Requirements:
Pentium II or Pentium III; 64 MB RAM for Pentium II, 128 MB RAM for Pentium III; can be run directly from CD-ROM or from copy made available through a LAN (licensing specifies use in password protected environment); CD-ROM drive; sound card and speakers

Supplementary Software:
QuickTime 6.0 or higher (not provided on CD-ROM)

Documentation:
Free online instructor's manual (http://press.georgetown.edu/detail.html?id=9781589011861)

Price:
$44.95

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

En una palabra is an interactive software program that features authentic samples from Córdoba, Argentina, to introduce students with a variety of linguistic backgrounds and proficiency levels to the culture and speech patterns of the region. It features three main areas: (a) a pre-

sentation of the authors' pedagogical goals followed by the history of Córdoba through analyses of several web sites and the speech of Córdoba, (b) the introduction of culture through single word identification made possible by audiovisual files, and (c) written transcriptions of the oral texts and glosses that help define specific words orally produced by the speakers.

The program begins with a written explanation of the pedagogical goals suggesting that students learn Argentinean culture through word identification. The software features a section based on the history of Córdoba and some places of interest (e.g., *la Cañada*), as well as several links to online Argentinean newspapers and other important web sites. Moreover, another section based on the speech in Córdoba introduces different linguistic terms such as *yeísmo*—the lack of contrast between the sounds corresponding to the "ll" and "y" Spanish letters. Each term is explained in Spanish and samples are drawn from the video files used in the software.

The general intent of *En una palabra* is to provide users with the opportunity to learn Spanish culture through vocabulary and listening comprehension. This goal is accomplished through video files in which 15 people from Córdoba define the same 10 concepts according to their individual perspective. The selected speakers represent a variety of ages and educational and professional backgrounds, demonstrating the existence of a multiplicity of voices within the same community.

Finally, the software provides written support such as transcriptions of each video and a selective glossary. If students do not understand a word, they can click on it to obtain the definition in the glossary.

EVALUATION

Technological Features

Instructions on how to run the program are included with the software in a "Read Me" file in html format. This file explains how to launch and run certain files included in the CD-ROM by clicking on *En una palabra for Mac.osx* or *En una palabra for PC*. However, the instructions could be made more accessible directly from the start up menu because it was initially unclear how to proceed. It is important to point out that it remains the responsibility of users to make sure that QuickTime is installed on the computer, and, if this has not been done, users can install it from the link provided on the CD-ROM (http://www.apple.com/quicktime) located under *Ayuda y navegación* 'help and navigation' or in the ReadMe file. Additionally, it should be noted that when users attempt to read texts (using the transcription support), the scrolling function of the mouse does not function properly.

Different computers (two of them were Intel Core 2 Duo CPU, 2.0 GB of RAM, Windows XP and Intel Core Solo CPU, 1.99 GB of RAM, Windows XP) were used for testing *En una palabra*. The PCs used for the review have sufficient CPU power for playing audio and video files. However, the program generated a loud noise when attempting to load the videos, which can indeed distract users from listening to the audio input. A solution to stop the noise is to copy the software's files to the computer's hard drive, so the program runs from the computer without having to use the CD-ROM, thus making the "run from CD-ROM feature" obsolete. It is clear that the noise comes from the CD-ROM when information is read from it; most likely the CD-ROM that was tested by the reviewer was the source of the problem. (The CD may have been damaged or slightly warped; this problem sometimes occurs in manufacturing CDs.)

On a more positive note, this software is language lab friendly according to the developers' statement on the CD-ROM cover:

> Language labs that purchase a copy of En una palabra, Córdoba, Argentina will automatically receive rights to (a) post an electronic copy of the CD-ROM on a secure (password protected) network for use by current students and faculty at their institution; and (b) loan the number of purchased copies to students.

En una palabra, Córdoba, Argentina is recommended because any language resource center can administer the content of the software to all students interested in the language. The software can be used in and outside the formal classroom because of the great flexibility it offers as well as its ease of use.

Activities (Procedure)

The interface is user friendly, and users can easily go from the person of their selection to another without following any particular sequence of persons or concepts. For example, users can click on the concept *orgullo* or any other concept and then select any of the 15 native speakers (e.g., Alberto, Daniel, Danuta, María, etc). The program opens to a main screen with information about the program itself, about the city of Córdoba, and the speech of Córdoba (see Figure 1). Three links are located on the upper left side of the screen. When users click on *Este programa* 'this program,' they can find different links such as *Ayuda y navegación* which aid in understanding the functions of the software.

Figure 1
Main Screen
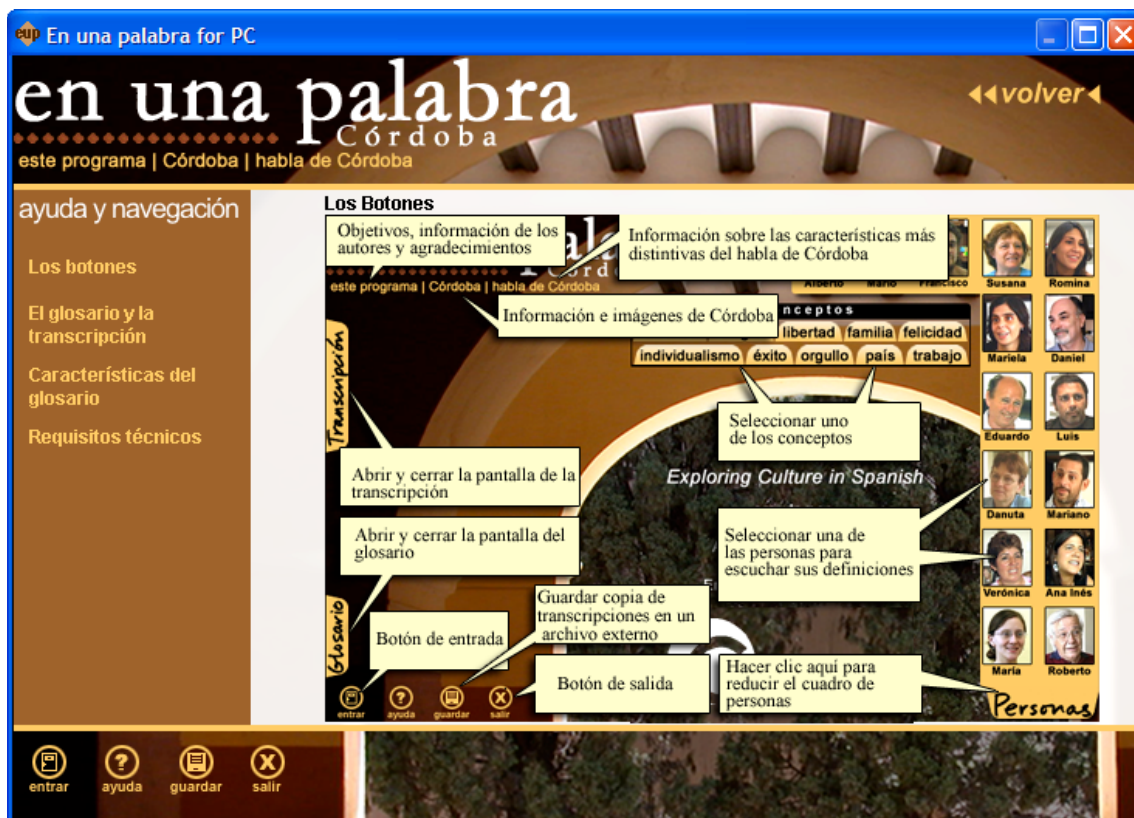
Images of the 15 speakers from Córdoba are found on the right side of the screen along with 10 specific concepts assigned to each one. On the left side, users are provided with the transcription feature which offers a written version of the oral text presented by the selected speaker. The written support offers students the opportunity to eventually read the oral presentations without having to listen to them. They can also play, pause, rewind, or fast forward the video which helps students pay attention to the pronunciation, unknown words, or specific expressions. Under the transcription label one can find that the glossary easily opens by clicking on the glossary label.

The glossary is easy to use and the font size is adequate. The glosses feature Spanish synonyms that represent well the concepts by offering different expressions on how to use the words. For example, when perusing the word *cuenta*, the glossary states the following: "1) Darse cuenta: Comprender (to understand) or 2) tener en cuenta: considerar (to consider)." Unfortunately, no pictures associated with the words are provided which could serve as reinforcement to help the learner remember those words. Nonetheless, despite the authors' belief that L2 explanations could be helpful to beginners, in my opinion presenting material in the target language may be difficult for first-year learners to understand. Also, the criteria used in the selection of which words to gloss were based on words that beginning and intermediate learners would find difficult to understand. However, this selection does not always match their criteria because the authors did not select all low frequency words; they also selected some high frequency words but not others. Some of the glosses provided are for advanced vocabulary (e.g., *ermitaño*, *gremio*, *libertinaje*, *dignificado*, *consaguineidad*, *rezongar*, and *ciego*), but other advanced vocabulary items often do not have glosses (e.g., *ceguera*, *desesperante*, and *balizas*). In addition, users find a gloss for *cabeza* 'head' but not for *manos* 'hands' which is also a part of the body that could be unknown to beginners. Or, one can find a gloss for *vínculo* 'tie, bond' but not for *lazo* which has virtually the same meaning as *vínculo*. Because the software is specifically designed to learn Spanish culture by means of lexical words, all expressions or words related to culture should be included in the glossary. Why do the authors include the glosses for *joder* 'to annoy, to be a pain' and *mierda* 'shit' but exclude *cagada* 'drag, shit, crap' and *puta* 'whore?' All are colloquial words and presumably unknown to beginners. Further, the selection of glosses for some pronominal verbs, such as *levantarse* 'to get up', could also have been included for nonpronominal verbs, such as *levantar* 'to raise, to pick up, to lift' since both words appear in the same oral texts.

One helpful feature of the software is the opportunity to copy the transcriptions of the oral texts. The program allows users to export selected transcriptions as a text file for future reference. As described in the *Ayuda* section, users have to click on the *Copiar* button each time they want to select a transcription to be saved. When ready to export all the transcriptions, they then click on the *Guardar* button, which prompts them for a location to save the text file (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
Transcript

Learners are exposed to listening and reading materials that can be viewed simultaneously when playing the video and opening the transcription label for a specific word. The features of the videos and readings are focused on learning vocabulary embedded in Hispanic culture and in the diverse pronunciation of the texts. Some pronunciation samples are introduced when clicking on the speech of Córdoba (see Figure 3). The interface for these samples is poor primarily because users are not given the option of stopping the oral input. This is not a problem for the short samples (e.g., from 1 word to 13 words), but when the sample is longer (e.g., 28 words for *tonada cordobesa* and 41 words for *aspiración de la "s"*) not being able to pause the recording could be frustrating to learners. One must keep in mind that vocabulary learning is included at a discourse level through authentic monologues from a variety of people. The developers also mentioned that beginning learners can understand the general meaning of the texts without knowing all the words. This claim is absolutely accurate, but the presence of the instructor is crucial for explaining and introducing some texts, especially those spoken at a faster pace. Without some kind of help, learners could be easily disappointed or frustrated listening to difficult-to-understand authentic target language samples.

Figure 3
Pronunciation Sample
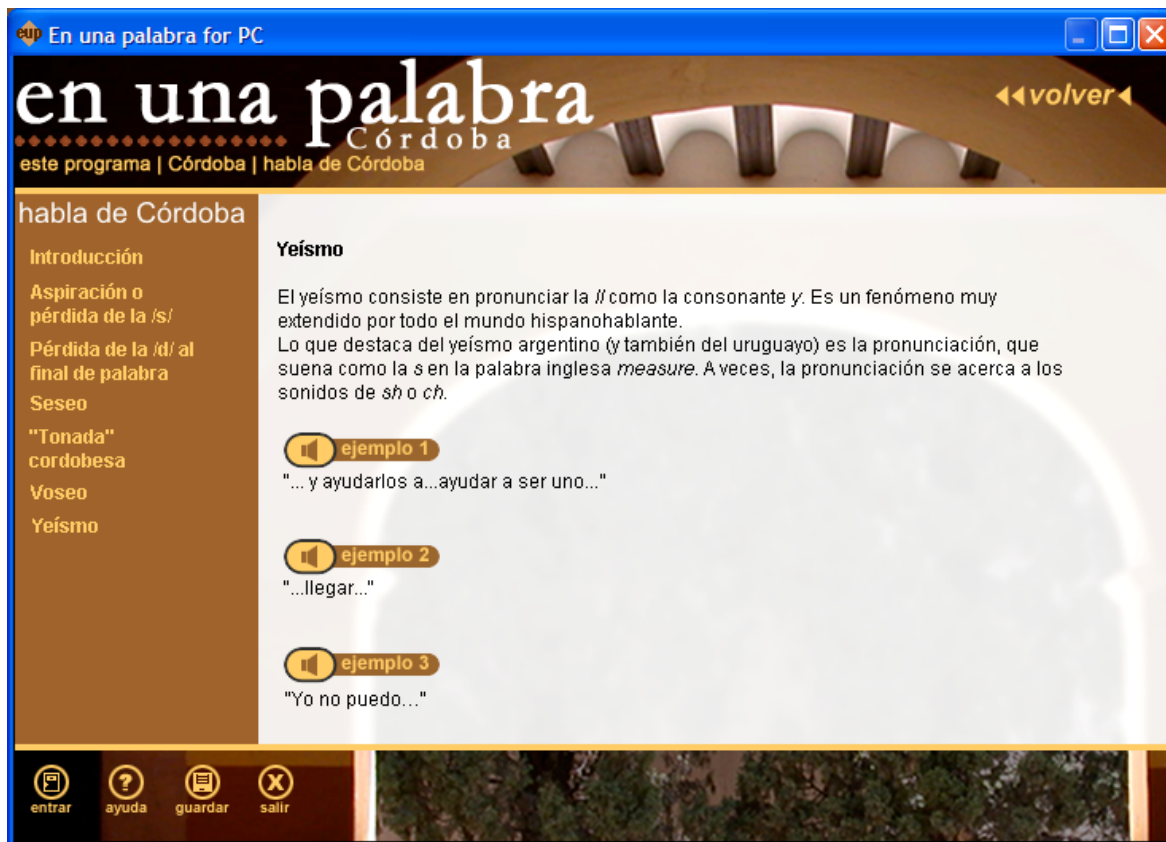
Teacher Fit (Approach)

With the help of their teachers, all students, regardless of their proficiency level, can use this software. The instructor is to select videos according to their teaching program and the different levels of a Spanish curriculum. The authors do not explicitly state which methodological approach they support in *En una palabra*. Instead, in the online instructor's manual, they provide different activities according to different proficiency levels (e.g., novice/intermediate, intermediate/advanced, advanced/superior). The authentic material found in the software also provides learners with comprehensible input since the authors provide definitions for the majority of the words in the glossary sections. It is apparent that the authors believe that one way of learning a language is by being exposed to natural and spontaneous language while focusing on a list of concepts supported by audiovisual and comprehensible input, which corresponds to the idea of Krashen's (1982) "natural communicative input." Further, it is stated in the online instructor's manual that teachers must prepare beginning learners psychologically for the difficulty of understanding native speakers. The samples of activities presented in the manual are focused on the five goals (i.e., communication, culture, connections, comparisons, and communities) of The National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (NSFLE, 2006). As a consequence, the activities prepare learners to listen to the videos or read the written version of the oral text. Some activities are based on word identification, vocabulary improvement, oral and written production, debates, group work, individual work for homework, oral presentation, and oral interviews with people other than classmates.

Current theory advances beyond Krashen's (1982) idea that target language input facilitates L2 acquisition when learners perceive the language input by noticing aspects of the input (Schmidt, 1990). Unfortunately, the authors did not make any linguistic features salient in the written versions or transcriptions of the oral texts. Since this software is designed to help students learn more about culture in Córdoba, Argentina, the authors, when possible, could have highlighted the pronoun *vos* and the verbal forms indicating *voseo* in a different color since these are linguistic terms frequently used in Argentina.

With respect to linguistic accuracy in the software, several typos are noticeable. When one clicks on *Este programa* and then on *Muchas gracias a …*, one finds some accent errors on the vowel *i* in some words. It seems that the developers placed the accent marks in the right place and the errors lay with the program publisher. Some of these typos are presented below.

"….nos guió por la Manzana Jesu´tica" instead of "… Jesuítica"

"nos diero n información esencial para nuestra estad´a en Córdoba" instead of "… estadía en Córdoba".

"nos mostraron un pueblo entrañable y un pa´s bell´simo a los que anhelamos volver" instead of "…país bellísimo…"

The same problem with the *i* is found when one clicks on *Córdoba en la red* and finds *Clar´n* instead of *Clarín* referring to one of the newspapers from Argentina. Two other typos are found under the *Características del glosario* link, which is located under the *Ayuda y navegación* link: *M. masculine* should be written as *M. masculino* and *… tiene una forma mascualina* should be *tiene una forma masculina*. In the written version of the oral text about the definition of *libertad* there is the typo of *vículo* instead of *vínculo* when one is listening to Eduardo. In the same text, the authors used the symbol of a line ____ instead of writing the continuation of Eduardo's speech: *Se____los medios de comunicación, porque, bueno, sabemos, lo que pasa con eso*. It should read *Si es libre arbitrio en los medios de comunicación, porque, bueno*, …, however it is difficult to hear because, in this case, two vowels from different words meet and the first one is eliminated *si es → s´es* and *libre arbitrio → libr´arbitrio*. Moreover, the speaker aspirates the "s" in the word *es* [eh] which makes it even more difficult to understand the utterance. When Verónica defines *ambición*, another error occurs in the written transcription: *algo que no me gusta muchoero, pero …* instead of *algo que no me gusta mucho, pero* ….

The program provides language samples that are both linguistically and socioculturally varied and derived from the spontaneous speech of 15 people from Córdoba, Argentina. Nevertheless, the developers should have paid more attention to the selected samples when explaining the speech of Córdoba. First of all, according to the authors, there is deletion of the final /d/ in the word *felicidad* in three selected samples. However, no deletion is found in those samples, but rather a reduction of the final consonant, which is very common in colloquial speech. Then, the first sample, *es lo que conozco*, provided to show *la tonada cordobesa* should be removed because there is no presence of such a *tonada* in the selected sample. Third, the samples depicting the *yeísmo* are not adequate because the pronunciation of the consonants *y* and *ll* are from different speakers using different articulation (i.e., voiced fricative and voiceless affricate) of the consonants, and both consonants are not present in the same sample. To really understand *yeísmo*, they should have selected a sample with one speaker pronouncing both consonants. The same problem is found in the section of *aspiración o pérdida de la s* 'aspiration or deletion of the s.' The authors should change the title to *aspiración de la s* because the samples provided do not show any deletion of the s.

This program is not appropriate for those teachers who do not follow a communicative or natural approach. Likewise, it is not suitable for those teachers who believe that students have to learn Spanish based on their own native language or who are accustomed to teaching grammar rules or vocabulary out of context. Fortunately, the majority of teachers today believe that in order to learn a language students must be exposed to authentic language from the beginning of their contact with the language without leaving aside the culture of that language.

The program developers guide teachers to help shed light on how to teach culture. Levy (2007) discusses five facets of the concept of culture: culture as elemental, culture as relative (not absolute), culture as group membership, culture as contested, and culture as individual. Three of these facets are incorporated in this program. The authors implemented teaching culture as elemental; each of their 15 speakers has a cultural background based on his or her emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and values, and this cultural background is shown in their audiovisual input. They also teach culture as relative by framing culture around 10 common concepts which are studied from the basic concepts (e.g., family, friends, work, and country) to more advanced ones (e.g., ambition, pride, freedom, success, happiness, and individualism). Finally, they teach culture as group membership because they offer a variation on learning culture by a wide variety of means: the individual experiences of 15 different people of varying ages (e.g., 20, 28, 31, 35, 53, 63 years old) with different professions (e.g., hairdresser, engineer, professor, artist, librarian, taxi driver, etc.) and different political views.

It is obvious that this program provides input in order to prepare learners to work on listening, culture, reading, and vocabulary. Those teachers who want to use the software to provide opportunities for learners to work on their linguistic output such as speaking or writing must design their own tasks in order to focus on these skills.

Learner Fit (Design)

En una palabra is intended to be used as a tool by the teacher who gives suitable direction to learners on what to listen to and how to use the material. However, advanced learners could use the program for self-learning. Learners who wish to work on their pronunciation or who desire to have a Spanish Argentinean accent and accompanying vocabulary can take full advantage of using the software.

According to Meskill (1996), learners interacting with the different modes of input must be guided; oral texts need to be adjusted to the learner's level of development in order to improve their recall of the material. The use of transcriptions and glosses give learners written support to help them better comprehend the passage.

One of the characteristic traits of the program is that the video segments include linguistic and paralinguistic features such as body language, gestures, prosody, and so on that can help to convey meaning to the learners (Hoven, 1999). Learner decisions about when to listen and derive meaning from the input available can be measured by using the audiovisual or written input.

Rate of the speech and frequency of pausing are some factors influencing listening comprehension (Lynch, 1998). Apparently, inserting pauses in normal speech (e.g., *bueno*, *eh*, *ummm*, *¿no?*, and *este*) facilitates comprehension. Accordingly, learners benefit from this aspect because all videos in *En una palabra* are full of pauses, and the students generally have the option to stop the video or rewind it. Moreover, the rate of speech is adequate for begin-

ners, and the written support will help comprehension if revised in order to add all high fre-quency words. The 15 speakers featured in the program use pauses to think about their next utterance. The memory capacity of listeners with limited knowledge of L2 is another issue to understand the message, but, again, if developers revise the written support to take some of the issues mentioned here into account, learners will not have much difficulty in comprehend-ing the input.

SUMMARY

En una palabra: Córdoba, Argentina is appropriate software for intermediate and advanced students when the linguistic and cultural content of the videos are linked to the Spanish cur-riculum. Because not all high frequency words are included in the glosses, it is obvious that beginners would not be prepared for the complex speech patterns and vocabulary of the na-tive speakers. The program is suitable to receive linguistic and sociolinguistic input from na-tive speakers of Argentina, but not for drill and practice activities unless the teacher creates these types of tasks. The clarity of speech, speech rate with inserted pauses, and variety of accents from people of this Argentinean community offers exposure to authentic language which is crucial for students to learn the target language. However, the video segments pres-ent only monologues (i.e., a person describing or explaining a word), and the effectiveness of the program could be improved by including different listening situations (e.g., dialogues and monologues). Perhaps the authors did not include dialogues because when listeners have to pay attention to two speakers instead of one, the task becomes much more difficult. Learners could also benefit by using not only written support from the oral texts, but also picture sup-port to better recall some words appearing in the passages.

SCALED RATING
(1 low-5 high)

Implementation Possibilities: 4
Pedagogical Features: 3.5
Sociolinguistic Accuracy: 3
Use of Computer Capabilities: 4
Ease of Use: 4
Overall Evaluation: 4
Value for Money: 4

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PRODUCER DETAILS

REVIEWER'S BIODATA

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