Editor's Note: The last international review (ETR&D 41:2) followed developments in technology in French-speaking countries. This edition continues the language-based reviews with an examination of trends in Spanish-speaking (Hispanic) countries. Dr. Mark Larsen, Associate Editor of Computing for Hispania, a Spanish-language journal, examines a variety of technology-related trends. Some topics he discusses, such as computer-assisted language learning and videodisc projects, have been examined in previous reviews; others, such as language-based electronic networks, computer coding of diacritical marks, and computer analyses of literary texts, are new to these pages. Recognizing that the countries involved are complex and that the technologies are constantly changing, Dr. Larsen is to be commended for his willingness to examine the larger trends affecting the Spanish-speaking community.

Future International Reviews will deal with trends in other geographic and linguistic areas. The topical areas and the guest editors follow. Potential contributors from among our readers are encouraged to contact the specific guest editor for their area of interest.

The Far East: Dr. Mei-Yan Lu, Instructional Technology, San José State University, San José, CA 95912-0076.

Scandinavia: Dr. Rune Pettersson, University of Stockholm, Platslagarougen 55, 14600 Tullinge, Sweden.

The Middle East: Dr. Karen Murphy, EHRD, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-3256.

The Hispanic World in the Information Age

by Mark D. Larsen

An assessment of the current state of technology among Spanish-speaking countries reveals a paradox of both good news and bad news. The bad news is that, unlike countries such as France, Germany, or Japan, where technology is often on the cutting edge of the Information Age, Hispanic nations generally lack the resources, training, and industries to produce electronic technology, and therefore rely almost exclusively upon imported hardware and software. To make matters worse, the governments of most of these countries, remembering past instances of economic exploitation by foreign interests, impose horrendous duties upon such imports. The result is that the technology that finally arrives in the Hispanic world is often antiquated, fails to meet the needs of Spanish speakers, and yet is so expensive that its use by the already impoverished populace is unthinkable.

The good news is that there have been more technological developments, and thus more computer products available, in Spanish than in any other language except English. How can one explain this paradox? In the first place, speakers of Spanish far outnumber those of French, German, and Japanese combined, and supply is driven by demand. Furthermore, the fifth largest Spanish-speaking nation in the world happens to be the unquestioned leader in technological research and development: the United States.
As the current Associate Editor of Computing for Hispania, I have tried to stay abreast of computer-related activities in the Hispanic world, but it is only fair to warn readers that the following information is undoubtedly incomplete and will likely be outdated by the time it is printed. Nonetheless, many of the sources cited might prove useful for those who would like to pursue the topics further.

Computer-Assisted Language Learning

Since the beginnings of instructional technology, one of the first subjects thought to be adaptable to the computer screen was that of foreign languages, with Spanish often emerging as the prime candidate for research and development. In retrospect, it appears that early programmers were laboring under certain false assumptions. Perhaps because many of them received their own educations in an era of dictionaries, workbooks, and laboratory exercises, they erroneously concluded that grammar, vocabulary, and translation drills were sufficient means to acquire a respectable level of proficiency in a second language. Of course, recent trends in methodology have clearly shown that nothing could be farther from the truth. Such a premise is akin to instructing students in all the elements of music theory and then expecting them to be able to play the piano.

Nevertheless, among the first educational programs were several that tried to revamp old Spanish laboratory manuals into an electronic format. Although such efforts may have been misguided, they were not without their benefits: computers have unlimited patience, adjust to the pace of the individual student, provide immediate feedback, require interactive participation, and can prove captivating and fun. In short, electronic workbooks are certainly more effective than their paper-and-ink predecessors, but constitute an unfortunate case of applying space-age technology to stone-age language teaching methodology. As a result, after nearly two decades of educational software development, hardly any program would accurately fall under the rubric “computer-assisted language learning” (CALL), although there are now myriad packages available that focus on “computer-assisted grammar learning.”

In a relatively short time after the invention of the microcomputer, the number of instructional programs for Spanish had increased to the point that educators began to take notice and seek reliable information regarding the value and effectiveness of the various packages. In 1984, Professor Ted Sackett at the University of Southern California assumed the position of editor of Hispania, and one of the most innovative changes he brought to the journal was the inclusion of a computer column to address these very concerns. He wisely appointed one of the earliest pioneers in computer research in the humanities, Professor Ned Davison at the University of Utah, to head up the section, and it has proved an invaluable service to its readers ever since. Indeed, at the present time Hispania is still the only major language journal to boast a regular computer section—a surprising and lamentable state of affairs, given the number of programs that are available in French, German, and sundry other tongues.

In addition to articles, notes, and reports on computer-related topics, the column has published literally dozens of reviews of software products for use with the Spanish language. These programs range from simple flash-card exercises to sophisticated authoring systems; from utilities for Spanish diacritics to on-line literary anthologies; and from scanning software to translation packages. Any educator who desires information about any computer program or project involving Spanish is likely to find it in Hispania.

Digitized Sound and Videodisc Applications

Readers who peruse the aforementioned reviews will discover that instructional programs in Spanish have become much more sophisticated over the years, and have even started to supplant the traditional grammar drills with formats which better approximate content-based instruction (Quinn, 1990). For example, many packages now take advantage of digitized sound, which enables students to listen to authentic, native-speaker pronuncia-