

From Spanish to Portuguese: Learn by Decoding

A transformation manual for Spanish speakers acquiring Portuguese — rules auto-generated from IE-CoR gold cognate data; pedagogy authored

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Provenance & scope. The rule tables (§2–§3) are sound correspondences harvested automatically by aligning Spanish↔Portuguese cognate pairs in the IE-CoR database (expert cognacy), ranked by frequency; they are phonemic (IPA-ish), not spelling rules, and are a data-driven first draft. The pronunciation, bridge-sentence and instructor sections are authored and illustrative — validate all of it against a full corpus and a native speaker before course use. Counts are small (a Swadesh-sized list), so treat low-count rules as tendencies.

1. The good news: your crib

Of 170 basic concepts, 143 (84%) are cognate — the Portuguese word is a regular transformation of the Spanish word you already know. Only 27 (16%) are genuinely different words to memorise. Your learning target is therefore mostly a rule system, not a vocabulary.

Sounds that usually stay the same (transfer for free): /r/, /k/, /m/, /t/, /p/, /u/, /d/, /f/.

2. The rules to learn — consonants (the recognition skeleton)

Consonants carry most of a word's identity; these are the highest-leverage rules.

rule	count	reliability	examples
/j/ → ∅	16	55%	bjεxo→vεlu (old); juβja→juve (rain)
/β/ → /v/	13	76%	nweβo→novu (new); aβe→avi (bird)
/n/ → ∅	10	71%	luna→lue (moon); montajna→mōtejne (mountain)
/l/ → ∅	10	67%	afilaðo→efiadu (sharp); θjelo→sew (sky)
/s/ → /ʃ/ (variable)	8	47%	estretʃo→iftreitu (narrow); estarseptaðo→iftar+sētaðu (sit)
/b/ → /v/	8	80%	bjεxo→vεlu (old); bεr→ver (see)
/θ/ → /s/ (variable)	7	44%	θjelo→sew (sky); dulθe→dosi (sweet)
/ð/ → /d/	5	71%	poðriðo→podri (rotten); mōrðεr→murder (bite)
/w/ → ∅	5	83%	nweβo→novu (new); weso→osu (bone)
/ŋ/ → ∅	5	56%	grande→grēði (big); kaŋtar→kētar (sing)
/χ/ → /k/	4	80%	bjεxo→vεlu (old); moχaðo→muλaðu (wet)
/r/ → ∅	4	50%	nōmbre→nōmi (name); sangre→sēxi (blood)
/ɣ/ → /g/	4	100%	χuɣar→zugar (play); aɣwa→agwe (water)
/r/ → /R/ (variable)	4	44%	rio→riu (river); reðoŋdo→riðondu (round)
/ɲ/ → /n/	3	100%	pekeɲo→pikenu (small); ɲjeβe→nεvi (snow)
/ŋ/ → ∅	3	100%	sangre→sēxi (blood); blaŋko→brēku (white)

rule	count	reliability	examples
/x/ → /χ/	3	60%	μυχερ→μυχερ (woman); ορεχα→υρελε (ear)

3. The rules to learn — vowels (the main body of shifts)

Vowels shift more than consonants; this is where most of the transformation lives.

rule	count	reliability	examples
/a/ → /e/	48	86%	bariγa→bεxiγe (belly); luna→luε (moon)
/o/ → /u/	47	78%	estretfo→iftreitu (narrow); nweβo→novu (new)
/e/ → /i/ (variable)	25	44%	karne→karni (meat); nɔmbre→nɔmi (name)
/ε/ → /e/	12	71%	mɔrðεr→murder (bite); bεr→ver (see)
/ɔ/ → /o/ (variable)	8	47%	reðɔŋdo→riðɔndu (round); dɔs→doif (two)
/tʃ/ → /t/	4	80%	estretfo→iftreitu (narrow); notʃe→nɔʃti (night)
/i/ → /e/ (variable)	3	30%	deθir→dizer (say); morir→murer (die)

4. Genuinely new words (no rule bridges them) — and your hidden access points

These 27 concepts are not cognate, so no rule turns the Spanish word into the Portuguese one. But your language often still keeps a cognate of the Portuguese word — as a cultism, technical term, archaism or regional word, sometimes with a shifted meaning. That word is an access point: a hook already in your head. Where the meaning differs we flag the false friend, so the hook helps you remember the Portuguese word without misusing it. (E.g. Spanish has no everyday cognate of Portuguese vermelho ‘red’ — but it has bermellón ‘vermilion (pigment)’; the colour is not the same, the word is.)

meaning	Spanish (everyday)	Portuguese	access via Spanish	note — meaning may differ
back black	espalda negro	kɔʃteʃ pretu	— prieto	Sp prieto (‘dark, tight; dark-skinned’) = cognate of PT preto ‘black’ — meaning shifted.
burn claw	kemarse θarpa	ɛrder gare	— garra	Sp garra ‘claw’ is fully current (esp. Mexican/American Spanish) = PT garra: you may already own the target word through your own variety. (Also fig. ‘guts/nerve’ — a mild false friend.)
dog	pɛro	kẽũ	can	Sp can (literary ‘dog’, cf. canino, canalla) = cognate of PT cão.
far	lɛxos	lõʒi	longitud, pro- longar	the Sp root long- (longitud, prolongar, longevo) is the cognate of PT longe ‘far’.
feather fight	pluma pelearse	pene lutar	— luchar	Sp luchar ‘to fight/struggle’ is the everyday cognate of PT lutar — this word is not new at all.

meaning	Spanish (everyday)	Portuguese	access via Spanish	note — meaning may differ
forest hair	bosque pelo	flureŋte keβelu	— cabello	Sp formal cabelo = direct cognate of PT cabelo — you already have it, just less colloquial than pelo.
hit horn knee	golpear kʷerno rođija	beter jifri zweɫu	— — hinojos	Sp archaic de hinojos ('kneeling') = cognate of PT joelho (both from Latin genuculum).
long near neck	largo θerka kʷejo	kumpriđu peru pijkosu	— — pescuezo	Sp pescuezo (colloquial / of an animal, 'neck') = cognate of PT pescoço.
pull	tirar	pujar	pujar	Sp pular ('to strain / heave') = cognate of PT puxar 'to pull'.
push	empuxar	ēpurar	empujar	Sp empujar 'to push' = cognate of PT empurrar — but beware: PT puxar means PULL, a classic false friend.
red	roxo	virmeɫu	bermellón	Sp bermellón = the pigment vermillion (orange-red) — the colour is not general 'red', but the word is PT vermelho's cognate.
smell tail	oler kola	fejrar raβu	— rabo	Sp rabo ('tail / rear', colloquial) = the same word as PT rabo — already yours.
thick thigh	gorđo muzlo	grosu koje	— coxal, cojo	Sp anatomical coxal ('of the hip') and cojo ('lame') share the root of PT coxa 'thigh'.
throw wide worm	tirar antfo gusano	lēsar laryu vermi	— — verme, vermífugo	Sp medical verme ('intestinal worm') = cognate of PT verme.
yesterday	ajer	ōtē	—	

5. Pronunciation, rhythm & parallel listening

Reference accent — the one closest to you. Northeastern Brazilian Portuguese (e.g. cultured Recife/Salvador) — or, equally, cultured northern European Portuguese (Porto). Reason: both keep fuller, more open, less-reduced vowels and clearer syllables than Rio or Lisbon, so they sit closest to a Spanish ear. Avoid Rio (strong *ti*→[tʃi], *di*→[dʒi] palatalisation and vowel reduction) and Lisbon (heavy unstressed-vowel reduction to [i]/deletion) at the start.

Rhythm & sounds to train:

- Learn the two things Spanish lacks: nasal vowels (ã, õ, -m, -ão) and the open/closed vowel contrast (avó [ɔ] 'grandmother' vs avô [o] 'grandfather').
- In the reference accent, unstressed vowels stay full and final -s is [s] (not Rio's [ʃ]) — much closer to Spanish; this is why the accent is chosen.

- The consonant skeleton maps almost one-to-one; the mode difference is carried by vowels and nasality, so parallel listening matters more here than the rule table alone.
- Note on the transcriptions: the example rules come from a European Portuguese source, so you will see reduced [i] and [j] (e.g. *estreito* → [iʃtreitu]). In your recommended fuller accent these stay clearer — read the transcriptions for the correspondence, and use your chosen accent for the sound.

Parallel listening. For each bridge below (next section), hear the target sentence, then its bridge echo in your own language, back to back. You train not only the sound rules but the mode — the rhythm and melody the target speaks in.

6. Bridge sentences — feel the mode

A bridge is your own language bent toward the target: real words of your language, sometimes less usual ones, chosen so the sentence lines up almost word-for-word with the target. It is not the most natural phrasing — that is given too — but it lets you cross into the target's form and mode in the smallest step. Read the target, then the bridge, then the natural line.

- Portuguese (target): *O transeunte tenta pegar o ônibus.*
- Spanish (bridge — bent to align): *El transeúnte intenta tomar el autobús.*
- Spanish (natural): *El peatón quiere subirse al camión.*
- The passer-by tries to catch the bus — bridge uses *ES transeúnte, intentar, tomar, autobús, all real*, to align with the Portuguese.
- Portuguese (target): *Ela ficou contente quando achou as chaves.*
- Spanish (bridge — bent to align): *Ella quedó contenta cuando halló las llaves.*
- Spanish (natural): *Ella se puso contenta cuando encontró las llaves.*
- She was happy when she found the keys — bridge *halló↔achou* (both from Latin *afflare*) and *llaves↔chaves* make the crossing visible.

7. How to study (decoding drill)

1. Trust the crib: read Portuguese and let the Spanish cognate surface.
2. Learn the consonant rules first — they let you recognise.
3. Drill the vowel rules by conversion: take Spanish words and produce the Portuguese form, then check.
4. Do parallel listening on the bridge sentences in the reference accent — internalise the mode, not just the segments.
5. Memorise the short new-word list.
6. Watch for false friends (form matches, meaning does not) — they are the rules' failures.

8. Pedagogical distance (this pair)

Cognate coverage 84%; 18 regular correspondence rules carry the bulk of the crossing; 27 new words. A close, cheap key — the method is at its strong end here.

9. For the instructor

Sequence. Teach recognition before production: the consonant rules (the skeleton) first, so learners decode what they hear and read; then drill the vowel rules by conversion. Use the bridge sentences. For each sentence show three lines — the target, the bridge (the student's language bent to align), and the natural phrasing — so students internalise the transformation of form and mode, not just the meaning. Fix one reference accent (the one closest to the student, in the Pronunciation section) and do parallel listening in it from day one: the mode — rhythm, vowel quality, nasality — is half the crossing. Teach false friends explicitly as the rules' failures. Keep sessions short and productive: a few rules + one bridge sentence + a conversion drill each.

This pair specifically. Spanish→Portuguese reading is nearly free; the effort is listening and pronouncing the nasals and open/closed vowels. Anchor the chosen accent and drill minimal pairs (avó/avô).

Rules generated by *build_manual.py* from IE-CoR; pronunciation, bridges and instructor notes authored. Refine against a full corpus, add the orthographic layer, a false-friend list and a native-speaker pass before use as a real course.