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Class Characteristics of Hispanic Writing in the Southeastern United States

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ABSTRACT: Handwriting exemplars of Hispanic writers, who were born in a Latin American country and who now reside in the southeastern United States, were examined to discern class characteristics. Embellishments, pen-lifts, and variety of letter forms and writing movements were common features found in the handwriting of Hispanics. Although Hispanic writing reflected a "foreign" influence, determination as to the writer's country of origin was not possible.

KEYWORDS: questioned documents, handwriting, class characteristics. Hispanic handwriting,

Class Characteristic: A distinguishing mark that is common to a group.

The general character of handwriting is influenced by the system of writing studied during an individual's formative period of life, the amount and quality of family tutelage, and how handwriting is used by a person during his or her everyday endeavors. The letter designs and how they are formed and joined with other letters will necessarily have the greatest influence on the overall appearance of one's handwriting. The role of the family in the education of its young, and in particular, the acquisition of manual skills such as handwriting, can impart a family influence to the style of writing. Likewise, an extensive use of one's writing in his or her employment can produce a type of handwriting which possesses the earmarks of a particular occupation (such as mathematician, accountant, and so forth). Although the style of writing acquired in youth will be modified by individual taste, family influences, and the writer's manual dexterity, characteristics of the original learned system will be visible to some extent. In his book, *Questioned Documents*, Albert S. Osborne referred to this in the following analogy: "In every handwriting, the original system of writing will to some extent protrude, as a foreign accent will show in speech" [1].

The importance of recognizing class characteristics in handwriting cannot be overemphasized. On the detection of forgery, the literature has recorded the many occasions whereby the unsuccessful forger has erred in omitting a particular style characteristic of genuine writing. The examiner of questioned documents has been often counseled on the significance of date, system, and nationality in the identification of handwriting. An identification can only be rendered when both *class* and individual characteristics combine in sufficient number with absence of any fundamental difference. It has also been noted that "a most common error of an unqualified examiner is to describe an unusual characteristic as being individual

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when in fact it belongs to a writing system outside the sphere of his experience" [2]. The apparent peculiarities observed in two sets of handwriting may only be the foreign accent of a system of writing indicative of a particular nationality or group of writers, and not the individualities of one writer. As stated by Conway, it is the "system particulars that aid in distinguishing the writer as belonging to a particular group of writers" [3].

Discussion

A group of people making sizeable contributions to the U.S. population has recently come from Latin America. Hispanics are now considered the nation's fastest-growing minority, with the greatest number arriving from Mexico, Cuba, El Salvador, and Colombia. In view of this recent influx of foreign-born residents, it was deemed appropriate to evaluate with this group of writers the axioms pertaining to class characteristics. In an attempt to discern whether any distinguishing characteristics occur in the writing of Hispanics, a study was conducted of handwriting specimens from subjects who were born in a Latin American country and who now reside in the Miami, Florida metropolitan area. The vast majority of these subjects arrived from Cuba within the last ten years and were born in the late 1950s to the mid 1960s. Although the results of this study would be heavily skewed toward the writings of Cubans in their twenties and thirties, comparative writings were also obtained from older Cuban-born residents who arrived in this country over twenty years ago, as well as specimens from residents whose native countries are Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.

Style characteristics may be used to determine the nationality of the writer or, more correctly, the country where he was taught to write [4].

The presence of foreign writing characteristics is a strong indication of foreign background, and particularly of foreign education [2].

In the consideration of which characteristics are reflective of a handwriting system, the quantity and quality of instruction in the formation of letter designs are important. It is common nowadays to find the teaching of handwriting a practical exercise as part of another subject such as spelling or language, rather than a separate course of instruction bearing a title like penmanship. With modern society's efforts to eliminate illiteracy, writing is taught as a means of communication rather than a skill reflecting degree of education. Whereas education was once the privilege of only those who could afford to pay for it, most Latin American countries now provide for and require a minimum of six years of schooling. In Cuba today, all public education is financed by the State and consists of one to three years pre-primary, six years primary, three years lower, and three years higher secondary. The secondary schooling is divided into either vocational studies or university preparation. All private schools in Cuba were nationalized in 1961. The other Latin American countries have both state-run and private schools, with the majority of private schools being Roman Catholic.

There is an obvious distinction between the handwriting of older Hispanics, educated in private schools and whose courses of study included penmanship or calligraphy, and the younger (20- to 30-year-old) writers whose education was most likely gained in state-run schools. The comments of a 49-year-old Cuban-born male included statements to the effect that "handwriting among Hispanics is a source of pride, as well as a means of projecting one's personality, assertiveness, and neatness."² This individual learned to write through the Palmer Method in private schools and remarked about the endless hours of practice needed

²Mr. Rolando D. Jimenez, Postmaster, Hialeah, FL, a Cuban-born resident of Florida since 1961, personal correspondence, May 1987.

to achieve the desired results (Fig. 1). Another remarked that the "Cubans coming over now are taught phonics and can neither spell nor write."³

The handwriting of an older (51-year-old) Argentine contains letter forms resembling the systems [5] published by the Kapelusz Publishing Co., Buenos Aires, in 1952, and are quite unlike the simplified letter forms depicted by Kapelusz in its workbook *Libro De Lectura Inicial* [6], published in 1982 (Fig. 2).

The Hispanic family plays a major part in the development of "proper" handwriting. One Cuban subject was taught how to write by his grandmother; another had a private tutor to ensure that her handwriting met the acceptable standards of correctness. The previously poor level of telecommunications in some Latin American countries encouraged the use of the written letter as a primary means of communication, and letter writing is still prevalent in Hispanic communities.

Writing systems are very similar in some groups of countries . . . and while a writer may have a foreign influence in his writing, it may be difficult to designate exactly his country of origin [2].

With the exception of those writers who are disciplined in the Palmer Method of writing, many of the Hispanic writers possessed a number of similar features regardless of the country of origin. Predominate among these features was a certain ornateness, particularly with the capital letter forms, some reassembling the style found in the round-hand systems (Fig. 3). There appears to be a greater influence from the older European systems of writing, possibly passed down through family associations, than from the more modern commercial or business style of writing. The ornate features usually consist of added embellishments and exaggerated size (Fig. 4). Some letters, however, are written in a more simplistic fashion. The capital letters *I*, *T*, and the lowercase *k* are written more often in a manuscript rather than cursive form (Fig. 5).

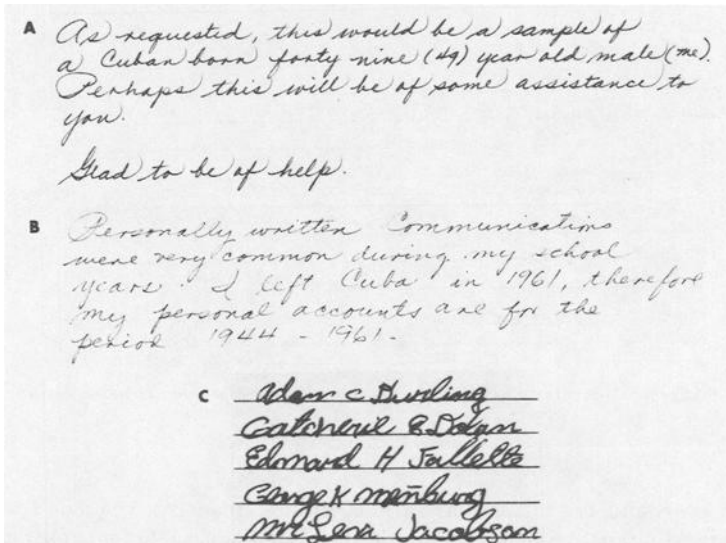


FIG. 1—Handwriting of Cuban-born residents of South Florida. The top samples, A and B, are from older Hispanics who were taught the Palmer method of writing in private schools. Sample C was provided by a 26-year-old Cuban who arrived in the United States in 1979.

³Ms. Maria Riedel, Clerk, U.S. Postal Service, Miami, FL, personal communication, Feb. 1987.

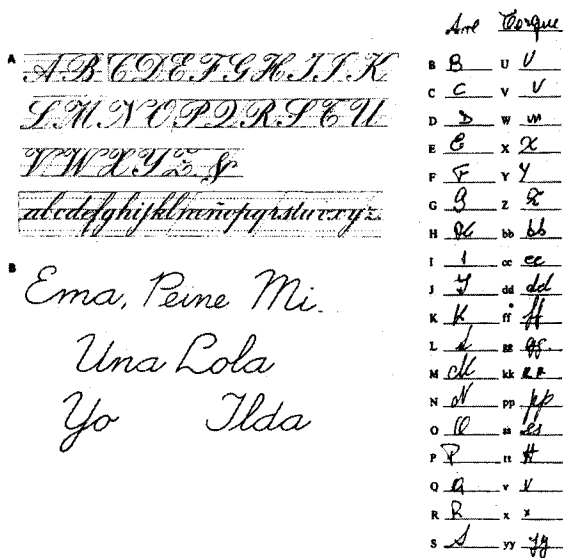


FIG. 2—Handwriting systems published by Kapeluz Publishing Co., Buenos Aires, Argentina, in (A) 1952 and (B) 1982. Alphabet on right was written by a 51-year-old Argentine in 1984.

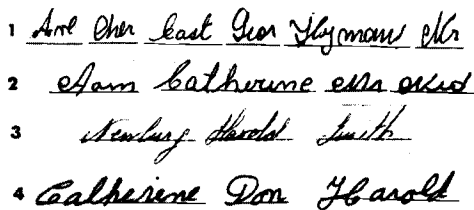


FIG. 3—Handwriting of an Argentine (line 1), a Colombian (line 2), and Cubans (lines 3 and 4).

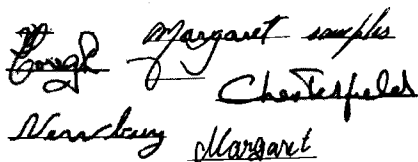


FIG. 4—Embellishments and hiatuses are common features among Hispanic writings.

Embellishments and size relationships also contribute to another common feature, the number of breaks or hiatuses found within words. It is not unusual to find upper and lower extenders embellished in such a fashion as to disrupt the writing movement to the extent that connecting strokes are prevented (Fig. 4). Pen-lifts before and after the formation of the oval in the lowercase letters *a*, *d*, and *g* have been taught in a number of European handwriting systems and were reflected in the handwriting of some Hispanics (Fig. 6).

It is not uncommon to find a variety of different forms and movements within the writings

Quaker Quaker Quaker
Quaker Quaker Quaker
Torgue Tom
Imig Ines

FIG. 5—The lowercase k and the capital letters T and I were often written in manuscript form.

~~*Ylang*~~
langdon Margout
entrance langdon

FIG. 6—Some European writing systems teach pen-lifts before and after the formation of ovals of the letters a, d, and g.

of Hispanics. A change from an arcaded style of writing to one which is highly garlandic (as depicted in the lowercase letters *m* and *n* of Fig. 7) was found to occur on more than one occasion. The use of a "double *u*" for *w* and a high-peaked initial stroke to the lowercase letter *p* (Fig. 8) are both common in Hispanic writings. The capital letter *Q* is formed in the oval shape a great deal more often than the numeral-two-like formation (Fig. 5). Some of the more unusual letter designs were found in the capital letters *I*, *F*, *Q*, and *W* (Fig. 9).

Quincy Quincy
Stadtil Stadtil
Edou Walther
Thomas William

FIG. 7—Contrasting movements (over versus underhanded) in the same writing, are depicted in the letters *n* and *m* of four different writers.

wrote Edward with
with wieser
samples Puper samples
apartods

FIG. 8—The formations of a "double-*u*" *w* and a high-peaked *p* are commonly found in Hispanic writings.

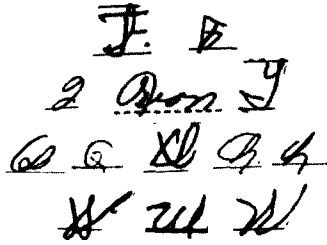


FIG. 9—Some of the more unusual letter formations were found in the capital letters, F, I, Q, and W.

All of these features provide for a foreign accent in the writings, but are not necessarily indicative of a specific country. The more transient the Hispanic communities become, the more system particulars will overlap. The less emphasis that is placed on handwriting as an acquired skill, greater will be the variety of forms and movements found in Hispanic handwriting.

Conclusions

A system of writing includes not only the design of the letter forms, but also the method of instructions on the formation of these designs. The influence of the system will result in handwriting characteristics prevalent among writers who studied that particular system. The ability to recognize and differentiate characteristics common to a particular group of writers from those specific to one individual is of paramount importance to the examiner of questioned documents.

In view of the recent large influx of Hispanics into the southeastern United States, writing samples from the Miami, Florida area were studied in an attempt to ascertain if there are handwriting features that belong to this group of writers. It was determined that unless an individual was disciplined in a writing system (such as the Palmer Method) having extensive use in the United States, his or her handwriting would exhibit, to some degree, a foreign "accent." It was further revealed that although a handwriting may reflect a Latin American influence, a determination as to the exact country of origin may not be possible. Common features found in the handwriting of Hispanics arriving from different Latin American countries included ornateness, pen-lifts, hiatuses, and a variety of forms and movements.

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