




# Take Care

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Dear Myrna,

As a native Catalan and Spanish speaker, I was surprised when I first learned of the English expression "Take care." To me, it felt unnatural to say it to everybody, and not just those who were sick or recovering from an illness. Because it sounded unnatural to my ears, in my ignorance as a basic English student, I thought this phrase could not possibly be used in everyday life. However, later in the USA, when I was doing my neurophysiology fellowship, I realized that this expression was real, and did not just exist in the books and English lessons that I practiced as a student. People used it all the time when ending a conversation with anybody, healthy or not, as a way of saying good wishes and goodbye to people known for years or only recently met. To me it felt a bit like an invasion of the other persons' private life. How can I wish "Take care" to somebody who I barely know and who is healthy? We do not use a similar expression in Catalan or Spanish. We simply say "goodbye," "Adeu, adios," "Fins aviat," and "hasta pronto" but we do not say to everybody "Ten cuidado, cuidate" and "Cuida't, preneu compte" because it sounds odd, a little strange, and not the way we use our language. To me "Take care" is more equivalent to "watch out." In my contact with native English speakers of course I used the phrase because I saw them using it a lot, although in my inner feelings it still sounded strange.

That is, up until this coronavirus pandemia. I have now suddenly realized how useful "Take care"—"cuidate, cuidaros"—is in the current situation. Not only for me to really wish people to take care of themselves, because there is a real danger, but also to discover that other people used the same expression with me, even if I were not in their inner circle. Since I had a mild form of the coronavirus infection recently, I learned with surprise that some of my colleagues, friends, and students

were approaching to wish me “Cúidese, cuida’t,” even those that were not close to me or I had not seen in many years. This expression now sounded natural to my ears. How well it fitted this situation! It says so simply, that you care about that person. Why did it not sound this way to me before?

This makes me think if something similar to this pandemic was the origin of this English expression? I can imagine that in the colonization of North America by northern Europeans, there were many dangers, diseases, and uncertainties that lead to the use of take care over goodbye. Or is there another explanation?

Best regards,

Joan

April 11, 2020

Dear Joan,

I do not know why we in the USA so casually say take care or what the origin of the use of this expression is. I am sure a linguist can provide the answer. It never occurred to me that a phrase as simple as take care would sound strange to anyone. It seems so straightforward and yet, what does it really mean; “take care” of what if not further specified? If Vito Corleone, in the movie *The Godfather* tells someone to “take care” [of them], them is ending up in the river with concrete boots on their feet. My mother telling me to take care came in many different contexts. There was the take care (not to get hit by a car) when I was 9 years old and crossing the street to play with a friend, the take care (not to get pneumonia) if I left the house without a scarf at almost any time of the year, and the dreaded, take care, when I was single and 30 and clearly not getting any younger (you can imagine what this refers to). I often end conversations or emails with friends and family with a “take care” in place of a goodbye. It had perhaps become a cliché. During these past few weeks, I find these two simple words infused with emotion and meaning. They enable me to take virtually hold of the person I am addressing, look into their eyes, and say with all sincerity, please take care, the world is an uncertain place.

Best wishes (perhaps another phrase we can discuss) and take care!

Myrna

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