1492 was a momentous year for Spain. The Genoese explorer Christopher Columbus set foot in the Americas, leading to the continent’s large-scale colonization by Europeans. Columbus did so by order of the so-called Catholic Monarchs of Spain, Queen Isabella I of Castile and King Ferdinand II of Aragon, while actually trying to discover a new travel route to Asia. Those same monarchs ordered, also in 1492, that all Jews be expelled from Spain, as they wanted to make sure that conversos, Jews-turned-Christians, would not return to their old faith. This led to mass migration movements, and expelled Jews fanned out across the whole of Europe and North-Africa. It was only in 2015 that Spain officially annulled this expulsion. Columbus’ discovery of the Americas and the driving away of the Jews had horrendous consequences. It led to an unprecedented and unscrupulous exploitation of an entire continent and greatly reduced cultural diversity in Spain. A homogeneous empire was in the making, and how support this better than by creating a uniform language?
It is no coincidence that 1492 also witnessed the publication of a pioneering grammar of the Spanish of Castile, the first one on a contemporary living language to be printed. It was composed by the Spanish humanist Antonio de Nebrija (1441–1522) and dedicated to Queen Isabella of Castile. The grammatical description concerned the queen’s native language of Castile, a region in north-central Spain, on which modern standard Spanish is based. Isabella was skeptical about the grammar’s use. When Nebrija presented the work to his queen, she dryly remarked that she already knew the language, so what use would she have for such a book? Nebrija patiently explained to her that “language has always accompanied empire,” which was why Castilian needed to be made uniform and harmonized according to the rules of the grammatical art just like Latin and Greek, both glorious ancient languages connected to past empires. The success of an empire, in other words, partly depends on an adequate and uniform language. A fixed language form would moreover allow the exceptional feats of Isabella to be recorded in a worthy written form.
Nebrija was a humanist *pur sang* who mastered the two most important languages of learning at that time: Latin and Greek. An alumnus of the university of Salamanca, he moved to the heartland of the Renaissance, the Italian peninsula, so as to imbibe classical learning in its new humanist style. After a sojourn of about ten years in Italy, he returned to Spain, where he contributed to the spread of humanist studies. He did so not only by teaching poetry and grammar, first at his alma mater and later at the university of Alcalá de Henares near Madrid, but also by composing his own Latin grammar, published in 1481, and by contributing to the so-called Complutensian Polyglot Bible project, which started in 1502 and was completed in 1517. Nebrija worked on the Latin and Greek versions of this pioneering publication project.
Rather than devising an entirely new descriptive framework, Nebrija based his 1492 work on Castilian Spanish primarily on the model of Latin grammar. This had the great advantage of being widely known among his readers. But there was a considerable disadvantage as well. The Castilian Spanish language system did not entirely match that of Latin, even though it was a Romance tongue deriving from Latin. For instance, Spanish clearly had articles such as *el* and *la*, which Latin lacked. In dealing with such un-Latin features of Spanish, Nebrija gratefully took advantage of his study of the Greek language and grammatical tradition. In the case of the Spanish article, he could point his readers to Greek and other languages, which, contrary to Latin, did boast this part of speech. Nebrija noted:

All languages I have heard about have a part of speech which the Latin language does not enjoy or know. The Greeks call it ‘*arteon*’ [actually ‘*árthron*’]. Those who have translated it from Greek in Latin call it ‘article’ [...].

Nebrija’s prologue to his 1492 grammar
Even though the article was absent from Latin grammar, his principal model, Nebrija nevertheless included it among the parts of speech of Spanish, which he was able to do thanks to his study of Greek in Italy as well as his acquaintance with other living tongues. He moreover argued that Spanish balances between Latin and Greek. The Greeks are too excessive in their use of articles and even employ it with proper names (as one would say in English: ‘the Peter’ rather than ‘Peter’). Luckily, Spanish does not do so, as it follows Latin usage by not using the article in connection with names. Nebrija not only tried to position Spanish vis-à-vis Latin and Greek, but he was also innovating by introducing a new part of speech into his classification, which, he claimed, lacks from both Latin and Greek: the so-called infinite participial noun, by which he meant invariable past participles ending in -do such as amado (from amar), ‘loved’, and construed with the auxiliary ‘to have’ (haber).

Not all of Nebrija’s innovations and adaptations of traditional grammatical models were successful or adequate, yet he resorted to all possible means in his attempt at faithfully describing the rules of Castilian Spanish and thereby reducing it to a uniform art like its illustrious predecessors Latin and Greek. Only after Nebrija’s grammatical encoding of a homogeneous Spanish would Queen Isabella have a worthy companion to the Spanish world empire she was founding.