

English Word Borrowings of a Latin American Origin

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A summary glance at a reasonable number of English word etymologies reveals that the language has a maniacal penchant for word borrowings. English has proven to be a language quite open to lexical denizens of other tongues with whom it might wander into contact. The history of word borrowings serves as a historical account of English speaking people coming into contact with peoples of other languages, under what circumstances they came together, and the transformations that occurred to English as a result of this interaction. As Serjeantson explains:

The adoption of foreign words into any dialect may come about in different ways, and the extent to which foreign elements become naturalized varies considerably. Contact between peoples of alien speech may be of several kinds; they may meet for instance through conquest, through colonization, through trade, or through literature (1).

Obviously there are contexts within which borrowings take place, and reasons why one language borrows from another. Skeat humorously verbalizes this concept when talking about borrowed words: "words do not fly through the air, like birds, that soar up in one country and can drop down in another; on the contrary, there must always be some intelligible point of contact between the English language and any language which it has laid under contribution in order to enlarge its vocabulary" (294).

There are literally thousands of words that English has borrowed from other languages over time. In the present century alone, almost one hundred different languages have made their contribution to the English word stock. In the Modern English period, French has been a most generous lexical benefactor to English, as well as Japanese, Spanish, Italian, Latin, Greek, German, Yiddish, Russian, Chinese, Arabic, Portuguese, Hindi, and many African languages (Finnegan, 101). It is the purpose of this paper to focus on this process as it pertains to word borrowings specifically of Caribbean and Central American origin and elucidate the historical and cultural contexts within which the borrowing occurred.

As is true of loan-words from all languages, oftentimes words are borrowed and used exclusively within a narrow field of interest, such as certain learned Latinate words used within the sciences. We will also find that word borrowings will take place within limited geographical areas within larger socio-political entities. Where these loan-words are known and possibly even used by the speech community in one area, they will oftentimes be unknown to the socio-political unit at large. Such will be the case of borrowings related to the flora and fauna of the region in question. Many other words were

borrowed, were only used for a short period of time, fell into disuse, and consequently will not be found in modern dictionaries.

For the aforementioned reasons, I will limit my listing of words to those still present in the 1994 CD-ROM version of the American Heritage Dictionary, 3rd ed. As we will see, even with this constraint, and additionally limiting our study to words borrowed from the Caribbean and Central America, the list of said words still in use is impressive. Because the ways through which new foreign words make their way into English are by no means straightforward, and are indeed quite variegated, some elucidation of vocabulary at this point in our study should prove beneficial before we begin to consider specific borrowings. Whenever possible, I will use loan-words from Spanish when giving examples of general principles relating to word borrowing.

Terminology

The lexicon of a language can be discussed in terms of native and nonnative words (or loan-words). A native word is defined as one “whose history (or etymology) can be traced back to the earliest known stages of the language” (Fromkin, 332). A loan-word is one that makes it into another language through a process of borrowing. The process of borrowing is defined as “when speakers imitate a word from a foreign language and at least partly adapt it in sound or grammar to their native speechways” (Pyles and Algeo, 286).

Additionally, words may be borrowed “directly” or “indirectly.” A direct borrowing is one in which a word which is a native word of the lexicon of another language comes into the lexicon of another. An indirect borrowing involves a kind of broker where a word may be borrowed into several different languages, and consequently modified, before finally being borrowed into the language in question. Let us examine the word *albatross* as a case in point. *Albatross* is ultimately a Phoenician word. It then passed hands into Greek, Arabic, Portuguese, and finally “flew” into English. Some additional vocabulary will aid us in our discussion. The direct source or immediate source of *albatross* is Portuguese. Its ultimate source is Phoenician. The ultimate source is the most original source language to which we are able to trace the word.

Another term we will be using is etymon. The etymon of a loan-word is the foreign word from which the loan-word is derived. Let us consider a word whose direct source is again Portuguese. The English word *dodo* has as its etymon the Portuguese word *doudo*. In Portuguese this word is still in use and it means “stupid.” Its earliest recorded occurrence in English is in 1628. It was originally used by Portuguese sailors in reference to a Mauritanian bird (Serjeantson, 208).

The last term we will consider is doublet. Pyles and Algeo define a doublet as “one pair of words in a language derived from the same etymon but by different channels” (344). An interesting phenomenon of doublets is that if the same etymon is borrowed at different points in history, the phonological representation of the word in the borrowing language will reflect phonological shifts in both languages (borrowing and lending) that have occurred

during the lapse between the two instances of borrowing. This term will prove especially useful when we consider the history of French borrowings.

As is true of most languages, most loan-words have been nouns. Originally the words were often times orthographically and/or phonologically different (resembling more their original spellings and pronunciations). New words are eventually assimilated and made to conform to the phonotactic and syntactic constraints of English. As a case in point, consider the English word *molasses* (first occurrence 1582). The etymon for this word is the plural form of the Portuguese word *melaço*. Obviously this word has been “naturalized” into English. In Portuguese, the word contains a letter not found in English. The pronunciation is slightly different as well. To be a well-accepted member of English, these phonotactic transformations are indeed necessary.

An additional distinction we will make at this time is between learned loan-words and popular loan-words. Learned loan-words are words that find their way into English usually through scholarly activity. They may or may not become part of everyday speech. Learned loan-words are usually made part of another lexicon by means of a written source. The words are taken from a foreign written source and will more often than not first be found in a written source in the borrowing language. Popular loan-words are “of oral transmission and are part of the vocabulary of everyday communication. For the most part they are not felt to be in any way different from English words” (Pyles and Algeo, 287). The English word *pickaninny* would be considered a popular loan-word. (Forgive the use of a word sometimes used pejoratively). It has as its etymon the Portuguese diminutive adjective *pequenino* which means “very small.” I choose this word for additional reasons as well. There is some uncertainty as to whether *pickaninny* stems from the Portuguese word *pequenino* or from the Spanish word *pequeño*.

As is the case with many loan-words from the Romance languages, the direct source of the word is at times difficult to ascertain. This is due to several factors: the languages are quite similar in their lexicons, the socio-political entities wherein these languages are spoken are geographically close one to the other, and additionally, many of these loan-words were borrowed into several of the different Romance languages before being borrowed into English. With these things in mind, let us now turn to each major Romance language and discover what lexical items they contributed to English, and how these borrowings took place.

Skeat goes on to tell us that “our borrowings from it [Spanish] have been due to our commercial and political relations with Spain, augmented by the descriptions of Spain and of her colonies which have been furnished by travelers and navigators” (317). Serjeantson additionally sums up the latter occurrence of borrowing when she says:

In recent times, English has partially adopted from distant countries many words which are used chiefly or exclusively in connection with the countries from which they come, by people who themselves know these countries, or in books describing them, either of necessity (for lack of equivalent English terms), or for the sake of local colour. The

book about South America will have its gauchos, lariats, vaqueros, ponchos, cordilleras, and llanos (6).

Serjeantsen (250-256) gives us a list of words that came to us through Spanish but that find their ultimate source in native languages of Central and South America. She points out that:

The chief dialects of South America to be represented in English are the Quichua [*sic*] dialect, from Peru, which reached considerable importance under the empire of the Incas, and spread over a considerable area in the North-West and South America; the Guarani dialect of parts of Paraguay and the Argentine which likewise extended far beyond its original territory, and in the sixteenth century was spoken, sometimes together with a local dialect, over much of Brazil; Mexican dialects; and the Carib dialects (originally from the mainland of South America) of the southern West Indies (251).

Some of the more recognizable loan-words listed by Serjeantsen that came through Spanish from a New World indigenous language include cassava, hammock, hurricane, iguana, manatee, savannah, yucca, potato, maize, tobacco, and llama.

That these things encountered in the New World surprised and amazed those Europeans who first came in contact with them is undeniable by reading the passages where the words are first used in English. As recorded by Serjeantsen (251), we find the following first uses: Richard Eden, writing in *Decades of the Newe Worlds*, a translation of a work by Peter Martyr, first uses the word *cacao* by telling us "In the steade [of money] the halfe shelles of almonds, whiche kynde of Barbarous money they [the Mexicans] caule cacao or cacauguate." We may find it hard to think of a hammock as strange, but obviously Martyr did as he refers to them as, "their hangynge beddes whiche they caule Hamacas. . ." In Raleigh's *Discovery of Guiana*: "They lay each of them in a cotten Hamaca, which we call brasill beds." Eden, this time translating Oviedo, speaks of hurricanes in the following manner: "Great tempestes which they caule Furacans or Hauracanas. . . ouerthrowe many howses and great trees." Now imagine for a moment what we might have felt had we chanced upon an iguana or a manatee for the first time. Where the word iguana appears for the first recorded instance in English the writer describes them as "foure footed beastes. . . named luanas, muche lyke unto Crocodiles, of eyght foote length, of most pleasaunte taste." Of the manatee we hear "a yonge fyshe of the kynde of those huge monsters of the sea whiche thinhabitours caule Manati."

At this point we will take a closer look at several cultural and historical factors which pertain specifically to the borrowing of North American Spanish lexical items into American English. We may first point out that the majority of these borrowings have taken place as a result of the two languages coming into contact in what is now the southwestern United States. At one time this region was predominantly populated by native Spanish speakers. A large portion of the inhabitants of said region even today speak Spanish. In 1932, Bentley (3) said that:

Although the Anglo-American civilization is overpowering and in time may obliterate the Spanish civilization in the southwestern part of the United States, the Spanish language maintains at present an important place in the lives of the people of that region. It has added not a few popular words to the common vocabulary of the American people.

Now, as the close of the twentieth century draws near, we see that Bentley's fears of Anglo obliteration of the Spanish presence in the United States will probably not be realized.

Four hundred years ago, what is now the southwestern United States was colonized by Spanish speakers. Many of these Spanish colonists were killed or driven out by the native Indians. Permanent settlements were established however, and the Spanish language was the only European tongue to be found in the region. The United States army invaded this region in 1846. By the middle of the nineteenth century, much linguistic intermingling was going on between English and Spanish. Borrowing ensued, the reasons for which are varied indeed. As Bentley (5) tells us:

Absolute necessity is not always the explanation. . . more often Spanish elements are taken over into English for local color effects, for their richness of connotation, including humor, for picturesqueness, or for descriptive contribution of some kind. Such words as *siesta*, *hackamore*, *cockroach* (from Spanish *cucaracha*) are illustrative of the first situation. *Rodeo*, *savvy*, *mañana*, and *juzgado* illustrate the second.

These words will be almost entirely popular, rather than learned loan-words. Many of these words have undergone a semantic shift in their transition from Spanish to English. *Rodeo* for example, originally had nothing to do with our modern day English denotation of a spectacle, but referred to a round-up of livestock on a ranch for the purposes of inventory taking. As Bentley tells us, "the earnest 'rodeo' of Spanish is in English no longer a 'rodeo', it has come to mean a kind of entertainment following the trail of Ringling or Barnum and Bailey. The change in meaning has taken place since the word entered the English vocabulary" (9).

Since we are considering the word *rodeo*, it is germane to mention that it is in this context of the cowboy or "vaquero" that many Spanish words were borrowed into American English. As Bentley (10) states:

of all agents responsible for the incorporation of Spanish words into the English vocabulary in America probably none has been so prolific as that picturesque and romantic figure in the life of America—the western vaquero. The cowboy learned the art of the lasso, including broncobusting and steer roping, from the Spanish and Mexican vaqueros with whom he worked and associated intimately on the cattle ranches and the ranges along both sides of the border. He found it convenient and sometimes necessary to adopt the nomenclature of its various tools and processes.

Of the Spanish words that entered English through American-Spanish in the nineteenth century, Pyles and Algeo (300) list:

adobe, bonanza, bronco, buckaroo (*vaquero*), calaboose (*calabozo*), canyon, chaparral 'scrub oak' (whence chaps, or shaps, 'leather pants worn by cowboys as protection against such vegetation'), cinch, frijoles, hacienda, hoosegow (*juzgado*, in Mexican Spanish 'jail'), lariat (*la reata* 'the rope'), lasso, mesa, mustang, patio, pinto, poncho, pueblo, ranch, rodeo, sierra, siesta, stampede (*estampida*), stevedor (*estivador* 'packer'), and vamoose (*vamos* 'let's go').

Conclusion

After a rather summary study of the words English has borrowed from Latin American origins during the Modern English period, we are able to trace the recent history of Western Civilization through words. Early on from Portuguese we see the beginnings of the era of colonialism. From Portuguese and Spanish we are able to talk about the environs of the New World. Lastly, as speakers of Romance languages found themselves within the borders of the United States, we see the linguistic contributions they made to English in the process. This craze for borrowing, so evident in English, has only enriched the language we speak and write with. To the languages of Latin America, we owe a great deal of our lexicon. I hope this study has brought about a heightened awareness of this fact to the reader.

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