

Sixteenth-century nautical terms in modern american spanish *

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Many of the obvious differences between Peninsular and American Spanish are lexical, and not the least interesting among them are the many Sixteenth century nautical terms that have survived in different parts of America with new or adapted meanings ¹.

The Spanish now spoken in Latin America derives basically from that introduced by the early colonists, all of whom were exposed to nautical jargon aboard the ships that brought them to America. For all emigrants the long and perilous voyage to the New World was undoubtedly a most vivid experience. The sailors' speech heard during the confinement of several weeks aboard ship would indelibly impress itself on their minds.

Perhaps the best direct evidence we have for the penetration of such vocabulary into the speech of the Spanish colonist are the famous letters of Eugenio de Salazar y Alarcón who emigrated to Santo Domingo in 1573. In his letter to Miranda de Ron, Salazar describes the wretched conditions under which he sailed from Tenerife, and devotes considerable space to the peculiar speech of the sailors: 'Y no es de maravillar que yo sepa algo en esta lengua,

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¹ Spanish American terms of nautical origin are the subject of various studies including: R. J. Cuervo, *Apuntaciones críticas sobre el lenguaje bogotano* (Bogotá, 1939); Delfín L. Garasa, 'Voces náuticas in Tierra Firme', in *Filología*, 4 (1952-1953), 169-209; Jorge Guillén Tato, 'Algunos americanismos de origen marineró', in *Anuario de estudios americanos* (Madrid, 1948), 416-634; Harri Meier, 'Rancho', in *Lengua, literatura, folklore: Estudios dedicados a Rodolfo Oroz*, (Santiago de Chile, 1967), 301-306; Berta Elena Vidal de Battini, 'Voces marinas en el habal rural de San Luis', in *Filología*, 1 (1949), 8-150.

porque me he procurado ejercitar mucho en ella, tanto que en todo lo que hablo se me va allá la mía. . . Así que ya no es en mi mano dejar de hablar esta lengua'².

Dependence upon ocean commerce also helped to reinforce maritime terminology in the speech of the Spanish settlements. It was ships and the sea which brought supplies, reinforcements, luxury items, new laws and redress from grievance, as well as news from home. We need only read the accounts of the annual arrival of the *flotas* at Portobello and Havana to realize the prominent place that ships and shipping occupied in the minds of the early Spanish colonists.

Once introduced into colonial American Spanish, these terms were frequently extended to other, non-nautical contexts, to the point that modern speakers often fail to realize that many a term they use is of nautical origin. We may take *rebenque* as an example. Originally it meant 'a roband, piece of rope used to tie the sail to the sail-yard'. These objects, because of their size, shape and apparent availability, were also used as whips to discipline recalcitrant seamen and lazy cabin boys. Today in American Spanish *rebenque* has come to mean 'a whip, riding crop', and is used by people who are quite unaware of its former, strictly nautical meaning. This is not to say that the nautical connotation always is unknown. Rather, the very fact that such a term was familiar made its use in a non-nautical context more vivid. *Anclarse*, for example, meaning 'to stay too long in one place, especially on a long and tedious visit', is a vivid metaphor precisely because we are quite aware of its original meaning.

The identification of former sea terms is difficult, because their earlier meanings have often been lost along with the predominantly sail-based technology to which they related. Spanish nautical terminology has changed considerably between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the present day. Merely studying the modern lexicon, therefore, might result in missing some terms which were once nautical, but are no longer so.

Fortunately, it has now become possible to study these expressions systematically. From a computer-assisted index based on more than 50,000 pages—or over thirty million words—of sixteenth century Spanish colonial documents, supplemented by several additional sources rich in nautical terminology, I have extracted and analy-

² Eugenio de Ochoa, ed., *Epistolario español*. Vol. II (Madrid, 1850; reprinted Madrid, 1926), 294.

sed a corpus of seven hundred and fifty one Spanish terms which were in current use among the sailors who plied the Atlantic³. These documents, comprising contracts, letters, reports, wills, deeds and legal records of all kinds, provide a picture of daily life in the colonies and probably reflect more accurately than literary works the everyday language of the period⁴. The criterion for selecting the words and terms which make up this corpus was that they be distinctly nautical terms, such as *amarra*, *anclar*, *chalupa*, *galera*, and other terms referring to the names or parts of ships, nautical activities and maneuvers, or items from the general vocabulary, but used upon the sea with a specialized application, such as *abajo*, *banco*, and *saltar (en tierra)*⁵.

Utilizing my corpus I have been able to work forward in time, so to speak, from the sixteenth century, and determine which of these identified and documented sea terms have developed additional, non-nautical meanings, or which have become so far assimilated into general American Spanish vernacular that their former sense has been all but lost. In the following list the date and place of the earliest appearance so far documented for each term in American Spanish will be given, together with its original meaning and the meaning it has since acquired.

Abajo. Attested in Santa Marta (i.e. the Caribbean) in 1527 (*Docs Col*, I, 219)⁶; originally 'below', *abajo* came to mean in Chile 'the northern coast' (DMA). Peru was considered 'down' from Chile because, south of the Equator, sailing north from Santiago involved going 'down' in degrees of latitude. Thus the northern coast

³ The complete corpus can be found in: J. J. Pontillo, 'Nautical Terms in Sixteenth Century American Spanish' (diss. State University of New York at Buffalo, 1975).

⁴ I must point out the work being done by Prof. Peter Boyd-Bowman in his ongoing Linguistic Analysis of Spanish Colonial Documents project (LASCODOCS). In it he and a team of researchers are preparing for analysis a data-bank of thousands of words culled from sixteenth century documents representing every New World Spanish colony, and furnishing each one with sufficient contexts to illustrate shades of meaning, grammatical usage, stylistic features and the like. The first volume to come out of this project, the *Léxico hispanoamericano del siglo XVI* (Madrid, 1971), served, while still in MS, as the source of approximately seventy percent of the terms explored in the preparation of this study.

⁵ I am well aware of how difficult it would be to show that a term of this latter type generalized or expanded its meaning in American Spanish since the term was also found in the general vocabulary. In the very few cases where I list one of this type as having expanded, I do so because there is a strong semantic link between the nautical use of the term and the expanded meaning.

⁶ A complete list of abbreviations will be found at the end of the notes.

of Chile was considered *abajo*, 'down' with respect to the southern coast.

Aguada. Documented in 1583 in the Rio de la Plata area (*Docs Ch*, III, 190); as a nautical term it meant 'the supply of water on a ship'. In Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Paraguay, and Uruguay it now means 'any watering place, any permanent water supply' (DMA; Amer.; Garasa).

Amarra. First documented in Mexico in 1526 (CDC, III, 37); this nautical term meaning 'hawser, mooring line' is quite common in American Spanish, particularly in the Caribbean, in the sense of 'any fastening with rope', while in Argentina it means 'a lasso' (DMA; Amer.).

Amarrar. First attested in Santa Marta in 1548 (*Docs Col.* IX, 256); meaning 'to tie or anchor' this nautical term is, in the Antillies, the common word for 'to tie' or 'to fasten in general'.

Anclar. Documented in Spanish America in 1526 (CDC, III, 51). As a nautical term it means 'to anchor'; in Tabasco (Mexico) the reflexive form *anclarse* now means 'to stay too long in one place, especially on a long and tedious visit' (Amer.).

Ancón. Documented in Lima in 1538 (LCL, I, 255); once 'an open or exposed port', it now means 'a corner of a piece of land or of a building' in Mexico and Colombia, 'a canyon or defile' in Colombia, and 'a type of raft' in Puerto Rico' (Amer.).

Aportar. First attested in Mexico in 1525 (*Protoc*, I, 81); this nautical term meaning 'to arrive at port' has come to mean 'to come near, to arrive in general' in Chile and Argentina (Amer.; Vidal de Battini).

Arrizar. Introduced into American Spanish in 1527 (CDC, III, 70); as a nautical term it meant 'to tie up' or 'to reef (to tie up the furled sails)'; in Honduras it now means 'to compel or force someone to do something' (Amer.).

Astillero. First documented in Mexico in 1542 (*Tas*, 373); from 'shipyard' this term has evolved to 'a place in the woods where wood is cut' in Mexico (DMA; Amer.).

Avería. Recorded in Puebla de los Angeles (Mexico) in 1549 (APP, I, 666); originally a nautical and commercial term meaning 'the damages suffered at sea', "losses suffered by merchants engaged in maritime trade", and 'an insurance policy to cover such losses' this term has come to mean in American Spanish 'an unfortunate event', 'any loss' and 'a scandal', while in Argentina it used to denote the invasions or pillagings of the Indians (Amer.; PLI).

Baja. Documented in American Spanish in 1528 (CDC, III, 121); from the nautical sense of 'a shallows' it has been extended to mean 'a swamp, a place overgrown with weeds' (Amer.; DMA).

Balsa. Documented in Tierra Firme (coasts of Venezuela and Colombia) in 1527 (Conqs TF, 43); formerly 'raft', it can mean 'a type of tree' or 'a swampy place overgrown with weeds' in modern American Spanish (DMA; Amer.).

Banco. Attested in American Spanish in 1528 (CDC, III, 93); from 'sand bar' this term has come to mean 'a fertile piece of land formed by the overflow of a river' in Ecuador, and 'a hill that rises abruptly from the grasslands' in Venezuela⁷. (DMA; Amer.).

Barra. First recorded in Chile in 1569 (Docs Ch, I, 146); from 'sand bar', this term has come to mean 'the mouth of a river' in the Caribbean coast of Mexico, Venezuela, and Rio de la Plata area (DMA). The semantic shift from 'sand bar' to 'mouth of a river' is not difficult to understand if we remember that sand bars often form at the mouth of rivers. The most famous *barra* in colonial Spanish America was that at Sanlúcar, at the mouth of the Guadalquivir. With very few exceptions, all ships coming to or departing from Spain had to do so via Sevilla, which required negotiating the *barra de Sanlúcar*.

Bastimento. First documented in Mexico in 1532 (Cron NGal, 292); this military and nautical term meaning 'the food supply for a voyage' generalized its meaning in American Spanish to 'the supply of food carried on trips' and to 'a daily ration of food' (Amer.).

Bergantín. Attested in Costa Rica in 1525 (Tió, 356); from 'a small ship, a brigantine' this term is now used figuratively in Puerto Rico as 'a black eye' (Amer.).

Boga. Documented in Peru in 1570 (PLZ, 16 v); originally 'the action of rowing', it is now used in Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico and Peru as 'an oarsman', and in Colombia it also may mean 'a poorly educated person' (DMA).

Bonanza. First recorded in Venezuela in 1578 (RCV, 117); formerly a nautical term meaning 'good weather for sailing' this term is now used in American Spanish to mean 'a rich vein in a mine' and 'the high productivity of a mine' (DMA; Amer.; PLI; Garasa). English

⁷ There are, of course, other meanings for *banco*, including that of 'a seat in a boat'. However, I believe that it was *banco*, 'sandbar', that extended its meaning to include those cited here. The sense of 'sandbar' is more closely related semantically to 'a fertile piece of land formed by the overflow of a river' and 'a hill that rises abruptly from the grasslands' than any of the other meanings of *banco*.

borrowed the term in the meaning of 'a rich vein in a mine' and further generalized it to mean 'anything that yields a large profit'.

Boyante. Recorded in Mexico ca. 1575 (FGE, 218); as a nautical term *boyante* meant 'bouyant, floating'; today in American Spanish it can mean 'that which has been restored or reestablished' (Amer.).

Brea. Documented in Puerto Rico in 1537 (Tió, 443); from the sense of 'tar' this term has come to mean 'excrement' in Mexico, and is used in Cuba and Mexico in the expression 'largar la *brea*' which means 'to waste money' or 'to evacuate the bowels' (Amer.; PLI).

Buzo. First recorded in Santo Domingo in 1535 (CDC, III, 316); this term was generalized from 'a diver, one who goes under the sea' to 'a mountain guide' in Argentina (DMA; Amer.).

Calafate (*galafate*). Attested in Puerto Rico in 1537 (Tió, 443); basically 'a caulker of ships' *calafate* or *galafate* in Cuba now is used to designate 'a type of fish', while in Ecuador *calafate* means 'an astute thief' (DMA; Amer.).

Carraca. Documented in the Yucatan in 1564 (Quij, II, 92); as a nautical term *carraca* meant 'a carrack', which was a large, three-masted ship with towering castles. Carracks were not well suited to trans-Atlantic shipping and were generally used in the conquest and colonization of America. Today, in American Spanish, *carraca* means 'any old and heavy vehicle' (DMA; Amer.).

Costa. First recorded in Santa Marta in 1527 (Docs Col, I, 219); once only, 'seashore, coast' *costa* is now used in Argentina as 'the edge of any body of water' and 'that part or strip of land where the mountains meet the plains' (Amer.; Vidal de Battini).

Costear. Documented in American Spanish in 1528 (CDC, III, 92); as a nautical term *costear* meant 'to sail along the coast', which was generalized in Chile and Argentina to 'to arrive at a place with difficulty' (Amer.). In Argentina and Puerto Rico *costear* also means 'to be on the sea shore' (Amer.), but this meaning is probably a direct verbal derivation of *costa* and not a semantic amplification of the nautical term *costear*.

Chalupa. Attested in Venezuela in 1569 (RCV, 70); originally 'a sloop', it now means 'a small canoe' in Mexico, Peru and Puerto Rico, 'a small tortilla' in Mexico, and 'a small ulcer' in Colombia (Amer.; DMA).

Echar a pique. Documented in Venezuela in 1569 (RCV, 73); as a nautical term it means 'to sink'; in Colombia and Venezuela it

now means 'to give oneself up for lost', while in Mexico it means 'to be accused, compromised or convicted' (*Amer.*).

Embarcadero. First recorded in Cuba in 1569 (*ACH*, II, 108); from the nautical sense of 'a landing or a place to load or board a ship' this term has been generalized in Argentina to mean 'a corral with a ramp to load animals on a train' (*DMA*).

Embarcar. Documented in Panama in 1543 (*Docs Nic*, VIII, 15); from 'to embark on a ship' this term has come to mean 'to put something or someone on any vehicle' in American Spanish, 'to induce someone into doing something' in Peru, while in Argentina, Mexico and Puerto Rico it can also mean 'to trick someone into doing something harmful to himself' (*Amer.*; *DMA*).

Ensenada. Documented in American Spanish in 1528 (*CDC*, III, 98); from the nautical sense of 'an estuary' this term has come to mean 'a small or enclosed pasture land' in Argentina (*DMA*; *Amer.*; Vidal de Battini).

Estero. Documented in Mexico in 1532 (*Cron NGal*, 200); this originally meant 'a salt marsh, an estuary' but evolved into 'a lowland, a swamp or flooded land, covered with plants' in Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay, 'the mouth of a river' in Cuba, 'a small stream' in Chile and Ecuador and 'a dry river bed' in Ecuador (*DMA*; *Amer.*).

Estoperol. Documented in American Spanish in 1528 (*CDC*, III, 166); formerly 'a short, round-headed nail used in caulking ships' now 'a kitchen utensil like a frying pan' in Colombia, 'any object with a large head in the form of a disk' in Paraguay while in Chile and Mexico the form *toperol* is 'a short, wide-headed nail' (*DMA*; *Amer.*).

Fletar. Attested in Nicaragua in 1527 (*Docs Nic*, I, 226); formerly 'to pay or charge for freight by sea' this term was generalized to mean 'to hire any kind of transportation' (*DMA*).

Flete. Attested in Santa Marta in 1528 (*Docs Col*, I, 267); originally 'passage money, money for freighting materials' this term has been generalized to mean 'the price or act of transporting merchandise in general' in Argentina, while in Cuba it means 'the man picked up by a streetwalker', with *fletera* a derivative used to designate the woman herself (*Amer.*; *DMA*; Vidal de Battini).

Galera. Documented in Panama in 1550 (*Docs Nic*, XVII, 172); originally 'a galley ship' this word has expanded its meaning to 'a shed' in Honduras, Mexico and Central America (*DMA*), perhaps because of the similarity in shape between a shed and a galley ship,

or perhaps because of the practice of hauling old ships onto the land where they were used as houses, barns, etc. In Cuba and Mexico *galera* can mean 'a prison cellblock' or 'the prisoners in a cellblock' (*Amer.*). This is similar to Italian, where *galera* also means 'a prison or jail' and both instances reflect the old custom of condemning prisoners to be rowers in galley ships.

Maroma. Documented in Peru in 1670 (PLZ, 46). From the nautical meaning of 'cable' this term has undergone various interesting amplifications: in general American Spanish it is an 'acrobatic trick, a change of political belief', in Argentina 'a swing, a kind of river ferry', (*Amer.*; Vidal de Battini), while in Puerto Rico it is 'a trick, a scheme'. The semantic change from 'cable' to 'acrobatic trick' was quite puzzling until I saw a drawing of a group of men working at a ropemaking machine. The various fibers were being twisted together at the same time, with one or more men working the handles which were attached to the different elements of the cable. There was obviously a great deal of tension on the cable and one can well imagine that if a person were not heavy enough, or were careless, he could easily be thrown into the air or spun around by the tension of the cable being made. Someone who was familiar with such ropemaking operations, which must have been quite common along the coasts of Latin America, might then use an expression such as *hace maromas* to mean both 'he is making rope' and 'he is doing acrobatic tricks'. From this initial semantic expansion, *maroma* itself would then become 'an acrobatic trick' and 'a trick in general' and, finally, 'a scheme'⁸.

Mazamorra. Documented in Nombre de Dios in 1535 (*Docs Col*, III, 244); from 'hard-tack porridge used on ships' this term has become the name for various kinds of typical dishes or porridges in Argentina, the Antillies (DMA; *Amer.*) and Colombia, while in Cuba it may mean 'athlete's foot'.

Navegar. First recorded in Peru in 1539 (Hark, 124); once only 'to sail, to navigate'; today the difficulties of sea travel are vividly recalled in northern Mexico, where *navegar* is a euphemism for 'to suffer or fight' (*Amer.*).

Obras muertas. Attested in Mexico in 1526 (CDC, III, 37); the nautical meaning of 'the hull of a ship exclusive of the masts, rigging,

⁸ There is also *maroma*, 'tight rope', which, although it may have helped *maroma* to generalize into 'trick, scheme' was probably not the initial semantic amplification. The meaning 'trick, scheme' is unknown in Bolivia, land-locked and far from rope-making operations.

etc.', is easily seen in the modern use of this term in Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay where it means 'a building under construction' and specially in Chile where it is 'the parts which have to be put into a house after its walls and roof are completed, i. e., windows, doors, paint, etc.' (*Amer.*; DMA).

Piloto. Documented in Lima, 1539 (LCL, I, 317); in addition to 'pilot' this term is now used in Chile as 'a person who is generous in entertaining his friends' and in the expression 'muchos *pilotos* pierden la nave' (*Amer.*; DMA), like the Italian *per tanti piloti si perde la nave*, equivalent to English 'too many cooks spoil the broth'.

Placer. First documented in Paraguay in 1526 (CDC, III, 43); this term originally meant 'a shallows' and came to be used in the expression '*placer de perlas*', 'a shallows where there were pearls' or 'a pearl mine'. English borrowed this term from American Spanish and applied it in placer mining. In Cuba *placer* also means 'a vacant lot', while in Colombia it is 'land prepared for seeding' (DMA).

Playa. Recorded in Havana in 1554 (PHA, 68); from 'beach' this term has been generalized to designate 'a cleared area (for various uses)' in Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay (DMA). In Venezuela *playa* means 'that part of a market place where the cheapest prices can be had'. Vendors simply drop the tailgates of their trucks and begin to sell. This use of *playa* seems to be a survival from the days of the *flotas* when merchandise newly arrived and unloaded on the beach could be purchased for a lower price than merchandise upon which cartage, storage (and perhaps taxes) had to be paid.

Rebenque. Attested in Santa Marta in 1549 (*Docs Col*, IX, 296); originally 'roband (a piece of rope used to fasten the sail to the sailyard)', and, while still a nautical term, 'whip', this term today in American Spanish generally means only 'whip' or 'riding crop' (DMA).

Rumbo. Documented in Santa Marta in 1533 (*Docs Col*, III, 72); from 'a navigational course' this term has come to mean 'a trail or blaze in the forest' in Bolivia and Mexico (*Amer.*).

Saltar (en tierra). This expression is documented in Mexico City in 1532 (Tió, 36), and meant 'to land'; today the expression *saltar a tierra* is used in Chile with the meaning 'to get out of jail', while in Tabasco (Mexico) *saltar* alone means 'to get off a ship' (*Amer.*).

Travesía. Recorded in Peru in 1571 (D Truj, 51); from the nautical meanings of 'distance; cross wind or current' this term has generalized in Chile to 'a sea breeze, or west wind coming over the

Cordillera' and in Argentina and Bolivia to 'a vast region, a desert' (DMA; *Amer.*).

Trinquete. Documented in American Spanish in 1528 (CDC, III, 76); originally 'the foresail, the foremast' today in Puerto Rico it is used in the expression 'estar de trinquete', which means 'to be well dressed' (DMA).

Trópico. Documented in American Spanish in 1528 (CDC, III, 85); this term is most properly an astronomical term used by sailors in their navigation to express 'the Tropic (of Cancer, Capricorn)'; today, in Colombia, Cuba and Puerto Rico the expression 'pasar los trópicos' means 'to suffer, to want' (DMA). This semantic amplification is clearly related to the fact sailing ships in the doldrums, or that part of the sea within the bounds of the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, were often beset by calms, squalls and light shifting winds.

Varar. Attested in Santa Marta in 1537 (*Docs Col*, IV, 234); originally 'to dry dock, to dock, to put on shore' this term is used reflexively in American Spanish with the meaning 'to be interrupted in a venture' (*Amer.*).

Viaje. Recorded in Mexico City in 1537 (*Protoc*, II, 100); in addition to 'voyage, journey' this term is used in Central America, Argentina, Colombia, Mexico and Puerto Rico in the expression 'de un viaje, de un buen viaje' meaning 'at once, at one time', while in Honduras 'hacer viaje' means 'to eat something avidly' (*Amer.*; DMA).

Conclusions: Categories of semantic change:

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The semantic shift of these terms from nautical to land use reveals various trends. The majority of words used on the land show a retention of their basic meanings but with a loss of their exclusively nautical connotations. For example, *demora*, 'the time spent in port' becomes 'any time spent or any delay'; *astillero*, 'a shipyard', i. e., 'a place where wood is cut and shaped into ships', becomes 'a place in the woods where wood is cut'. Most nautical terms used topographically are of this sort, in that a word is applied to a feature of the land with which it has some physical similarity. *Estero*, 'salt marsh, estuary' becomes 'a low land, a swamp or fertile land' while *banco*, 'sandbar' becomes 'a hill that rises abruptly from the grasslands'.

In other items, similarity of structure or appearance accounts for the extension of meaning. *Estoperol*, 'a nail with a large, round head',

is now used to designate any objet with a large head in the shape of a disk; *obras muertas*, 'the hull of a ship exclusive of mast, rigging, etc.', became 'a building under construction' and 'the parts which have to be put into a house after its walls and roof have been completed, i. e., windows, doors, paint, etc.'

Another group of terms show a quite logical historical development. *Abajo*, 'down' became 'the northern coast in Chile' because sailing North from Santiago de Chile requires sailing 'down' in degrees of latitude. *Galera*, 'galley ship', became 'jail' from the practice of condemning prisoners to serve as galley slaves. *Mazamorra*, 'hard-tack porridge used on ships' has been applied to a number of creole dishes.

Perhaps the most interesting group is that in which the nautical terms are used metaphorically, often with startling descriptive force. The figurative and expressive use of *vararse*, 'to run aground', to mean 'to be interrupted in a venture' and *navegar*, 'to sail', sometime meaning 'to suffer or fight' are examples of this type.

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