The Origin of Common Spanish Names for Fifteen Well-known Plants of Mexico

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A glance at practically any book dealing with the flora of Mexico reveals plant names of diverse derivation. Some Mexican plant names obviously are of Spanish origin; others appear as Hispanicized words of Indian origin, their roots going back to various Indian languages of the country; and others seem highly imaginative or descriptive, yet still of Spanish creation and tradition. The present study represents an attempt to bring to light, through a focus on fifteen well-known plant names of Mexico, specific historical, botanical, linguistic, and etymological patterns to help account for this diversity of plant terminology.

In general terms, it can be stated that the Spanish conquerors, coming into Mexico in the sixteenth century, encountered an environment very different in many respects from the one that they remembered back in the Iberian Peninsula. Yet at the same time they also came across many natural elements and places that had parallels in their Mother Country. The present study concentrates on the manner in which the newly arrived Spaniards and their descendants interpreted and named the flora that they encountered in New Spain, what is now Mexico.

In formulating this study, I chose to investigate only the names of familiar plants of the country, plants that would be known to most Mexicans and also to Americans familiar with Mexico and the southwestern United States. Though three of the plants (cacao, *palo verde*, and saguaro) are regional in distribution, they are quite familiar to most Mexicans.

With the exception of the tomato plant, which had been introduced into Mexico long before the arrival of the Spanish and even had been assigned an Aztec name, all plants studied are native. Introduced plants, often bearing names of foreign extraction, were excluded from this study, since my concern was the origin of common Spanish names for essentially

native Mexican plants only. Such limitation is essential to understanding the patterns at work in the native environment, patterns of language contact and borrowing between Spanish and indigenous languages. A cross section of words such as these gives us an idea of plant names in Spanish and their acculturation to the Mexican languages.

Concerning the plant names that I have chosen and which are arranged Names in the following section are arranged alphabetically. Every effort has been made to present a detailed etymology for each term. Where possible, I have also provided background information, such as the first recorded appearance of the word, the geographical distribution of the plant term within the country, the range of distribution of the plants themselves, and affinities with Old World plants which have long-established Spanish names reapplied and extended in meaning in the New World. It must be emphasized, however, that the availability of such information is severely limited.

1. *Acquate* 'avocado' (*Persea americana* Mill [my translation]*). "From the Aztec† word [Nahuatl] *ahuacatl* (which also means 'testicle') for *Persea americana* Mill and *Persea gratissima* Gaertn." (Santamaría 1959, 38). Robelo (338-399) also defines *ahuacatl* as *testículo* 'testicle.' Friederici (44), says that Motolinia used the term *aquacate* in 1541. Boyd-Bowman (32) indicates that the earliest Mexican documentation is from 1551. According to Corominas (1954, 58), this term was first documented in 1560 by Las Casas. *Aquacate* is a word used in Spanish for both the avocado tree and the fruit produced by the same plant. The avocado is native to tropical areas of Mexico.

2. *Ahuehuete* 'Moctezuma baldcypress' (*Taxodium distichum* L.). "From the Aztec word, *ahuehuetl*, from *atl* (water) and *huehue* (old). Other authors have given various etymologies; *Cupressus disticha* L. and *Taxodium mucronatum*" (Santamaría 1959, 45). Robelo (12) gives the definition *viejo del agua* 'old man of the water.' Boyd-Bowman (35) cites usage of the term in a document from Puebla, Mexico, in 1532. This famous tree was deemed sacred by the Aztecs and has long been considered the national tree of Mexico. The Moctezuma baldcypress is a common riverbank tree of central and southern Mexico.

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* Since there is a certain amount of confusion concerning the correct scientific Latin nomenclature for many of the plant terms included in this study, I have elected to cite the most reliable authorities (Bailey, Little and others - please refer to the bibliography at the end of this study) as the basis for the inclusion of the first scientific term(s) noted under each heading (these are set off in parenthesis and, as much as possible, include the name of the first person who scientifically named the plant).

† As used by most authorities, the word *Aztec* is used for all of the Nahuatl dialects spoken in the Tenochtitlan region (central Mexico) at the time of the Spanish Conquest. It includes all Nahuatl dialects, except for such dialects as Pipil, Pochutla and Textla (Whorf 1948, 4).

3. *Cacao* 'cacao' (*Theobroma cacao* L.). "From the Mayan word, *kakau*, from *kajkab*; from *kaj* (bitter) and *kab* (juice), Becerra. *Theobroma cacao* L." (Santamaría 1959, 171). Robelo (184) gives another possible etymology for this term: *cacao* (*cacahua-cuahuitl, cacahuatl* 'cacao'); *cuahuitl* 'tree, cacao tree'; both terms are of Aztec origin. Other authorities seem to prefer the Nahuatl origin for this term. Both *Webster's Third* (310) and Random House (206) cite only the Nahuatl etymon: "cacao" - from *caca-huatl* 'cacao beans.' Alonso de Molina's dictionary of 1571 (11) contains the Nahuatl entry *cacauatl* 'cacao.' Corominas (1954, 563) says that the term *cacao* was first documented in 1535 by Fernandez de Oviedo. Cacao, the tree that gives us cacao beans and chocolate, is thought to be native to tropical parts of eastern Mexico.

4. *Encino* 'evergreen oak, live oak' (various species of *Quercus*, such as *Quercus virginiana* Mill 'live oak,' found in southern United States and also in northern Mexico). "In Mexico *encino* is not an old term for *encina* (the common word used in Spain) but, rather, is the only term used in this country, where one never hears the word *encina*" (Santamaría 1959, 481). I do not necessarily agree that *encino* is the only form used in Mexico. Boyd-Bowman (35) cites the form *encina* from a document of 1563 from Yucatan. Furthermore, Martínez (166-68) lists over fifty types of oak in Mexico which bear the name *encina*. According to the *Diccionario de la lengua española* (525), "*encino* = *encina* and the word *encina* comes from the Latin adjective *īlĭcīna*, for evergreen oak, *ilex - icis*." It might be added here that there is a tendency in Spanish for tree names to end in "o" rather "a." *Encino*, coming from *encina*, was first documented in Spain in 1124 [Oelsch], according to Corominas (1954, 259). There are numerous species of evergreen oak common to central and northern Mexico. Likewise, there are various types of evergreen oak, *encinas*, found in Spain.

5. *Fresno* 'ash tree' (*Fraxinus velutina* Torr. and many other Mexican species). "From the Latin *fraxĭnus*, to *frézeno*, by the year 932, to *fresno* in modern Spanish" (Corominas 1961, 275). The term was first documented as *fresno* in 1210, according to Corominas (1954, 576). *Fresno* is recorded as a name for the velvet ash (*Fraxinus velutina* Torr.), a tree common to northern Mexico and the southwestern United States. Additional species of ash are native to central and northern Mexico and bear the name *fresnos*. Several species of ash tree also are native to Spain.

6. *Hediondilla* 'creosote bush' (*Larrea divaricata* Cav.). "Also sometimes recorded as *Larrea tridentada*; a plant found in northern and central Mexico (Santamaría 1959, 592). In some regions of Mexico this plant is also called *gobernadora* 'the governor's wife' or *jediondilla*. Sobarzo (175) notes this term from Sonora, for instance, with the spelling *jediondilla*. Thus it belongs to a class of plant names that in Spanish America end in *-illo* or *-illa*. The creosote bush is also a common plant of the deserts of the southwestern United States. "After a rain, the plants give off a musty, resinous odor which is the basis of the Mexican name *hediondilla* [freely translated 'little stinker']" (Dodge 40). No early documentation is available for *hediondilla*.

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7. *Maguey* 'century plant' (*Agave victoriae-reginae* Moore; over 300 species of this genus are found in dry and semi-arid tropical parts of the Western Hemisphere). There is considerable disagreement concerning the origin of this term. Santamaría (1942, 679) affirms that *maguey* is a word of "Carribean Indian origin; it is a generic word used from Mexico through Venezuela to describe *agaves.*" The *Diccionario de la lenqua española* (828) also gives the Carib origin. Corominas, on the other hand, states (1961, 366) that *maguey* is from Taíno, not Carib, in the Greater Antilles. As pointed out by Friederici (365-66), the balance of available evidence seems to point toward Taíno, a member of the Arawakan family extinct in the Antilles since the mid-sixteenth century. *Maguey* occurs in many early works: in Petrus Martyr, *De orbe novo, Decades tres* (Alcala 1516), in Oviedo's works, as well as in Las Casas. Corominas states (1954, 192) that *maguey* was first documented in Spanish in 1510 in a letter from Hernán Cortés, but appeared earlier in a Latin text in 1515 of P.M. de Anglería. Boyd-Bowman (549) describes the first documentation of *maguey* in Mexico in a manuscript of 1532. Century plants, various types of *agave*, are widely distributed throughout the southwestern United States, Mexico, and many other areas of Latin America. The *maguey* has been introduced into Spain and is widely distributed there as well.

8. *Mezquite* 'mesquite' (*Prosopis juliflora* [Swartz] DC.). "From the Aztec word, *mezquill* ... a leguminous tree common over a wide area of Mexico" (Santamaría 1959, 722). Molina's dictionary of 1571 cites *mizquill* as the origin of this tree name. Robelo (178) and Friederici (411-12) give the same origin. In addition to a wide distribution in Mexico, the mesquite tree is found in many parts of the southwestern United States.

9. *Nochebuena* 'poinsettia' (*Euphorbia pulcherrima* Willd.). "A plant also known as *Pascua* (Easter or Christmas flower) or *Flor de Nochebuena* (Christmas Eve flower). The name of the plant, *Nochebuena* (Christmas Eve), alludes to the time of year when this plant normally flowers." (Santamaría 1959, 761). The poinsettia is a plant native to central Mexico, though it is universally cultivated in that country and around the world. No early documentation is available for *Nochebuena* as the name for the poinsettia.

10. *Nogal* 'walnut' (for example, *Juglans microcarpa* Berland). Recorded as a Spanish term used in Mexico for *Juglans pyriformis* and *Juglans mollis* (Santamaría 1959, 761). "*Nogal* - from the Latin word *nucālis*; from *nux, nuez* [nut]" (*Dicc. la lengua española*, 922). The author could locate no documentation concerning the early occurrence of this term in the Spanish language. "*Nogal* - a name given for little walnut (*Juglans microcarpa* Berland) of Texas and northern Mexico and for Arizona walnut (*Juglans major*) of southern Arizona and northern Mexico" (Little 1968, 42-43). *Nogal* is applied to many other species of *Juglans* throughout Mexico. The so-called English walnut (*Juglans regia*), also bearing the Spanish name *nogal*, though not native to Spain, has been cultivated there for centuries.

11. *Nopal* 'prickly pear cactus' (for various species of *Opuntia*; 300 species are found from Canada to Argentina). "From the Aztec word, *nopalli; nopal* is a generic name for various types of cactus which produce *tunas* (edible fruit), and in particular, *Opuntia cactus* and

Opuntia hernandezii" (Santamaría 1959, 761). Robelo (345-46) and Friederici (449) also cite the Nahuatl word *nopalli* as the origin of *nopal*. Molina lists the form *nopalli*. Boyd-Bowman (628) finds *nopal* in a Mexican work of 1594. *Nopal* is the name generally used in Spanish for the common prickly pear cactus of central and northern Mexico and the southwestern United States.

12. *Palo verde* [also in English] (*Cercidium*, 8-10 species, and also *Parkinsonia aculeata*, "the Mexican palo verde" or "horse bean"). "A name applied to a number of plants in Mexico, but most commonly to species of *Cercidium* found in northern Mexico and the southwestern United States, in particular to *Cercidium peninsulare*, found in Baja California" (Santamaría 1942, 792). In the American Southwest, *palo verde* is the common name used by both English and Spanish speakers for *Cercidium microphyllum* and *Cercidium floridum*. Dodge adds (36) that "the name means 'green stick' in Spanish." This name comes from the fact that most parts of the tree are green: the trunk, the branches, and the leaves. The latter appear only during the wet season. The flowers are bright yellow, and light up the desert in spring. I could find no documentation for the first appearance of the word *palo verde* in Mexico.

13. *Pino-pinon* 'pinyon pine' (*Pinus cembroides* Zucc.). "A tree that produces seeds, called *piñones* (pine nuts), which are highly esteemed as a food in Mexico; the toasted pine nuts are sold by street vendors and are very popular" (Santamaría 1959, 854). "*Pino* comes from the Latin word *pinus* ... The word *piñon* comes from the Latin word *pinĕa* to *pina* to *piñón*" (*Dicc. de la lengua española* 1027-28). The first documentation of *pino* dates from the second half of the twelfth century in Spain [Oelsch] (Corominas 1964, 799-800). Corominas adds that *piñon* is first used to refer to the seed of the pine tree around 1330 in J. Manuel, *El libro del caballero*. In Mexico, Friederici (506) cites the use of *pino-piñon* by Cabeza de Vaca as early as 1542. Boyd-Bowman (704) notes these terms in Mexico in 1550. The words *piñon* or *pinyon* are used to describe the edible pine nut by Spanish and English speakers respectively in the American Southwest. The nut-bearing pinyon pine, *pino-piñon*, is a common tree of much of northern Mexico and southwestern United States.

14. *Saguaro* 'saguaro cactus' (*Carnegiea gigantea* Britt and Rose). "*Saguaro* is the common name for a cactus found in the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico. The Papago Indians utilize the fruit of this plant in many ways" (Santamaría 1942, 955). According to the *Random House Dictionary* (1260), *saguaro* is a Mexican-Spanish variation of *sahuaro* (alternate spelling); the word originally came from the Opata language. *Webster's Third* (1999) states that this term is probably from "Opata *sahuaro*." Sobarzo (286) cites its etymon as *sahuo*, from the Cahita language of northwestern Mexico. *Saguaro (sahuaro)* is in the process of being assimilated into the Spanish language. Not all Spanish dictionaries have included this term to date. Accordingly, there is no early documentation for the word *saguaro*. The saguaro cactus is a well-known, striking plant of the American southwestern deserts. It grows tall enough to be classified as a tree, and has many side

branches or shoots which make the plant appear to have outstretching arms.

15. *Tomate* 'the tomato and the tomato plant' (*Lycopersicum esculentum* Mill). "From the Aztec word, *tomatl*. The term *tomate* is used for the fruit of the tomato plant as well as for the plant itself; the plant is originally from South America, perhaps from Peru; and it is commonly cultivated throughout Mexico" (Santamaría 1942, 1067). Friederici (618) lists *tomatl, xictomatl,* and *xitomatl* as the parent words in Nahuatl. Robelo (280) cites *xic-tomatl* and *tomatl*. Molina lists *xitomatl* and *tomatl*. In modern Mexican-Spanish, one hears both *tomate* and *jitomate*. *Tomate* is the more general term throughout the country. *Jitomate* refers specifically to a type of large, juicy eating tomato, which is popular in the central part of the country. According to Corominas (1954, 494), the first documentation of the word *tomate* dates from the year 1532, in B. de Sahagun. Boyd-Bowman (926) cites a 1540 use in Mexico.

Observations and Conclusions.

Some plants native to Mexico are simply different species of trees or shrubs also found in Spain: e.g. *fresno* 'ash tree' *nogal* 'walnut' and *encino* 'evergreen oak.' For these plants, the early Spanish arrivals generally tended to apply the terms already in use in their own language, that is, terms that form part of the basic Hispanic lexical heritage. The documentation available suggests that this process of plant naming began almost immediately upon the arrival of the first Spaniards in Mexico.

In addition, at times apparently there was some special adaptation, as with *pino-piñon,* the pinyon pine, whose edible nut is similar to those produced by certain pine trees back in Spain. The Spanish, in Mexico, applied the already-established word in their language, *piñon* 'pine nut,' to describe the new nut-producing pine that they encountered. The result was an extension in meaning in the word *piñon,* as it has come to be applied to both the pinyon pine tree and the pinyon pine nut in Mexico.

The impact of Spanish culture and language also is seen in the creation of certain new plant terms in Mexico, that is, terms applied to new plants because of some property they possess: e.g. *hediondilla* 'creosote bush,' *palo verde,* and *Nochebuena* 'poinsettia.' The creosote bush is a common plant of the desert regions of northern Mexico and southwestern United States. Perhaps due to the fact that this plant is so nondescript, or because of the lack of a local Indian name, the Spanish-speaking inhabitants have described this plant in terms of its smell, as they perceived it.

Concerning *palo verde,* there is a common tendency in Mexico to call many trees *palos* (literally, "limbs" or "poles"). Santamaría points out

(1959, 788) that this use of *palo* is an Americanism, and that the word *palo* as a generic name for 'tree' is common not only in Mexico but also in Colombia, Venezuela, and other areas of Latin America as well. *Palo alto* 'tall tree' is another instance of the application of the term *palo* to a tree, truly a very tall one, the *palo alto*, the famous redwood tree which gave Palo Alto, California its name. We have already noted that the early inhabitants obviously named the *palo verde* in terms of its most apparent quality: greenness in all its observable parts.

Nochebuena 'poinsettia' is an additional example of the creation of a descriptive word, *Nochebuena* 'Christmas Eve,' for a plant so intimately associated with Christmas. The over-riding influence of the Catholic Church and Christianity in the minds of the Mexican inhabitants can be seen in the creation of this term.

For other reasons, historical, economic, and social in particular, the immigrant population also adopted and Hispanicized already existing Indian terms for flora that seemed totally new: e.g. *aquacate* 'avocado,' *mezquite* 'mesquite,' *tomate* 'tomato,' *maguey* 'century plant,' *saguaro* 'saguaro cactus,' *cacao* 'cacao,' *ahehuete* 'Moctezuma cypress,' and *nopal* 'prickly pear cactus.' The Indian substrata were and still are very strong in Mexico. For this reason, the already established Indian languages exerted a great deal of influence. It is easy to understand why the newly arrived Spaniards often turned to Nahuatl, Mayan, and other native Indian languages for words to describe plants that seemed totally new and different from ones they remembered in the Iberian Peninsula.

In light of this situation, it is of interest to note that the tomato plant probably is not of Mexican origin, but still the word *tomate* shows Aztec derivation (from the Nahuatl word *tomatl*). The word obviously traces from an earlier time when the tomato was introduced into Mexico by way of Central America by other Indians from South America. The Spanish simply Hispanicized the word they heard into *tomate*.

Curiously, the word *maguey* 'century plant,' like *tomate*, is of non-Mexican (Taíno) origin, although the term has been common in Mexican-Spanish for several centuries. It was carried to Mexico from the Caribbean area by Spanish explorers and settlers and applied to almost all types of *agave*.*

* The imported term, *maguey*, to a large extent has replaced the native Nahuatl word, *metl*, also a generic term for *agaves*. According to Friederici (409-10) 409-410 and Martínez (311), *metl*, though still used in certain parts of Mexico, such as Chiapas, definitely has lost ground to the far more common and favored term *maguey*. The reasons for this occurrence remain unclear.

The word *maíz* 'corn' is a term also encountered by the Spanish in the West Indies and subsequently introduced into Mexico. Since it is doubtful that the corn plant is native to Mexico and since the word was introduced so late, I have decided to exclude *maíz* from my study of essentially native plants of the country.

The fact that the Indian term *saguaro* 'saguaro cactus' has not yet appeared in many Spanish-language dictionaries, although the plant is well-known by this name in northern Mexico and the southwestern United States, demonstrates that the process of word borrowing and assimilation between Spanish and Indian languages, which began with the Spanish Conquest in the sixteenth century, continues, to a certain extent, up to the present.

With respect to another word of Indian origin, *cacao*, economic factors may have played a major role in the incorporation of this plant term and the term for its principal product, *chocolate*, into the Spanish language. (According to the *Random House Dictionary* (260), *chocolate* came into English by way of French *chocolat* and Spanish *chocolate*, from the original Nahuatl word, *chocolatl*.) Even before the arrival of the Spanish, the cacao bean already was a common article of commerce among the Aztecs. Cacao beans regularly were imported from the east coast of Mexico to the central part of the country, ground up, and made into highly esteemed, frothy drinks. As honored guests, at first, the Spanish invaders were offered cups of chocolate drink by their Aztec hosts. Chocolate, in many respects, captured the appetites of the newly arrived Spaniards, who, in turn, began the process of popularizing chocolate around the world and of introducing the words *cacao* and *chocolate* into Spanish.

An additional word of Aztec origin, *ahuehuete* 'Moctezuma baldcypress,' has been favored over the Spanish term *cipres*. This phenomenon was probably due to the social and historical significance of the tree, a very sacred plant for the Aztecs. The Spanish general term *cipres* 'cypress' seems to be used only occasionally to describe the Moctezuma cypress (*ahuehuete*) in Mexico (Santamaría 1959, 245).

The present study demonstrates considerable mixing and blending of cultures and languages in Mexico in terms of the origin of Spanish names for the common flora of the country. At times, Spanish words have been applied directly or else given extended meanings in Mexico; in some instances, creative descriptive terminology has been coined; and, in many other instances, Indian terminology has been Hispanicized and absorbed into the Spanish language.

Concerning the latter terminology, words that originally came into the Spanish language as Indian loan-words, Benjamin Lee Whorf (3-4) makes the following observations:

> The Mexican and Central American area offers a fertile field for scholarly investigation of this type, once the structures and problems of the many diverse linguistic stocks are known sufficiently to provide a solid framework of reference ...
>
> A loan-word may be defined as a word that at some past time was first used in contact with other words of a given language, having never before been used in context with such words, for the reason that the users had heard and understood its meaning in a different language, and in context with words of that language. Thus when a Portuguese-American in speaking Portuguese uses the word *estou* 'shop' in place of the native Portuguese word *loja*, he has used a loan-word, which, before it became such, was being used as a native word ('store') in another language (American English). After a sufficient lapse of time the features that mark a word as a loan-word may become inobvious, and it becomes a matter of relative standpoint whether or not it is to be considered as one.

The patterns described in this study indicate a tremendous enrichment of the Spanish language, both in Mexico and beyond its borders. Many of the words coming into Spanish, originally as loan-words and later as integral vocabulary items, have carried over into other languages as well: e.g. *tomato, avocado, cacao*, and *mesquite*. One might even mention the contribution to placenames in certain areas, such as Encino, California; Fresno, California; and Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora. These places obviously are named for areas where *fresnos*, *encinos*, and *nogales* were found in particular abundance.

In summary, this study demonstrates that the Spanish conquerors, coming into Mexico in the sixteenth century, brought along with them their native Spanish language, applied it to the new areas that they discovered, and "interpreted" Mexican flora. For species of plants similar to ones they remembered in Spain, the new arrivals tended to apply Spanish words that were already in existence in the language: e.g. *encino, fresno, nopal,* and *pino-piñon.* In addition, in time the newly formed Mexicans, basically of *mestizo* heritage (mixed Indian and European blood and culture), showed themselves to be highly innovative in the adopted language of their land, and created and have continued to create descriptive terms for certain new plants. Generally, these terms reflect some special property that the plants possess. Examples are *hediondilla, Nochebuena,* and

palo verde. What is more, the Spanish immigrants and their descendants also encountered other plants which seemed quite new and different, and absorbed many of the native Indian terms that they heard for these strange new natural entities. Examples of words derived from major indigenous languages of Mexico are *aquacate, ahuehuete, cacao, mezquite, nopal,* and *tomate. Saguaro* is an example of a term derived from a regional indigenous language. Another category consists of indigenous terms encountered by Spanish explorers and settlers in the West Indies and applied to plants that were previously unfamiliar. *Maguey* is an example of such a word, an American indigenous word introduced into Mexico from the West Indies by the arriving Spaniards. A study of plant names in Mexico reveals, in essence, two primary contributors: the Mother language, Spanish, and major indigenous languages, in particular Nahuatl.

It is my hope that the present work constitutes a pilot study which delineates trends and patterns that could be explored and expanded in a future investigation. I intend to broaden my study beyond Mexico and focus on the diverse origin of plant terms throughout all of Latin America, particularly Brazil.

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