The New Mexico Place-Name Dictionary: A Polyglot in Six Languages

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TO A LINGUIST UNDERTAKING A PLACE NAME DICTIONARY, the road seemed clear and relatively straight. A name is a name, as "a rose is a rose," or so it seemed to me, and although I knew collecting would be arduous, still there did not seem to be much ahead that was needlessly complicated or likely to perplex. I was naive. In the area I was to work, the name structure is like geology with stratification of early language deposits underlying later ones and with individual structures emerging as a result of linguistic erosion, folds and faults, plus the irregularities caused by time and cultural evolution. Many of the name districts in the United States have a mixture of language stocks similar to those in New Mexico, but not many have so large a group of aboriginal language forms and few have a time cycle that is so long. Complicated though these problems were (and still are), they were never lacking in interest, and the solution was always a challenge.

The matter of transfer or translingualization from one language to another was a problem for a phonologist in primitive as well as historical linguistics. Therefore, as the title of my paper indicates, *The New Mexico Place Name Dictionary* is a polyglot drawn from six languages. Of the aboriginal Indian tongues, dating in North America from perhaps the 5th century A.D. to the first European contacts in 1536 (when Cabeza de Vaca became the first non-Indian to leave a record about the Southwest), there were four which had contributed to both the field names and the settlement names. These were and still are:

Tanoan, with three sub-groups:

Tiwa (Taos, Picurís, Sandia, Isleta pueblos);

Tewa (San Juan, Santa Clara, San Ildefonso und Pojoaque – now defunct, Nambé, Tesuque, Hano – in what is today the Hopi reservation);

Towa (Jemez pueblo, Pecos – now defunct);
Keresan (Cochití, Santa Domigo, San Felipe, Santa Ana, Zia, Laguna, Acoma);
Zuñi (Zuñi Pueblo only);
Athapascan or Apache groups of New Mexico and Arizona, including the Navaho.

Although some of these languages never were spoken by more than a few hundred people, they represent some of the oldest speech records in North America, and the total group of Indian speakers matched the Europeans in New Mexico until the beginning of the nineteenth century. I feel sure that if all the Indian place names were recorded, they would constitute a large group in the area, but most of them are lost. Only those which appear in the Spanish chronicles and those which have been adopted in later English writings remain to us. As it is, I estimate that fewer than 10 per cent of the names in *The New Mexico Place Name Dictionary* will be from Indian sources.

Spanish is the fifth language matrix in which Southwestern place names are published. The Spanish chronicles date from the *Naufragios y Comentarios*, 1536, of Cabeza de Vaca to the last reports of the Republic of Mexico in 1848. They carry the names of settlements and of descriptive geographical features in both standard Spanish and regional Spanish, that is, Mexican and New Mexican Spanish. By my estimates, about 45 per cent of the New Mexican place names are Spanish. After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, English became the national language of New Mexico, and with increased movement of population from Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and the states farther east, especially into eastern and central New Mexico, English names began to appear on the maps. After 1879, the railroad shipping points crisscrossed the state with names of a cosmopolitan type. This last layer of place names which, whatever their etymology, we shall call English, constitutes about 45 per cent of the total number of place names. To summarize: the four Indian languages contribute from 5 to 10 per cent of our present familiar place names; Spanish and English divide almost equally the other 90 per cent. The commingling of these languages is the story of the present paper.

To illustrate this commingling: a little settlement six miles north of Santa Fe is called Tesuque and is named for an Indian pueblo

which in Tewa was *tat unge onwi*, "spotted dry place" or "place where the water comes through." The river here disappears in sandy soil and comes through the ground again in various places, which explains the descriptive elements in the name. The Spaniards translingualized this into *Tesuque* and, in time, the Indians moved away, leaving the pueblo in ruins. After the Spanish name had become known to Indians of the same linguistic group in neighboring pueblos, they replaced the old name with the new Tewa words which were closer in sound to the Spanish name, *i.e.*, *tay tsoon ghay.* "cottonwood tree place." Thus, what was originally "spotted dry place" to the Indians, is now "cottonwood tree place," because the Spanish pronunciation of the original Indian name became the basis for a second Indian place name which was really a folk etymology. Here was a commingling of Indian and Spanish. Then there are instances in which an Indian locality may today bear a name conferred upon it by another Indian community. Such is the case of Pecos Pueblo, a large Towa settlement located between the later Spanish towns of Santa Fe and Las Vegas. The word "pecos" also names the second largest river in the region, which heads in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of northern New Mexico and runs to the Mexican border in Texas, joining the Rio Grande at the Big Bend. "Law west of the Pecos" is a familiar idiom in western American English. The name has been ascribed both to Latin *pecus*, "cattle," and to an unidentified Indian word meaning "crooked," since the stream meanders a twisting route along the edge of the Llano Estacado or Staked Plain. But the best linguistic evidence is that it is derived from a Keresan Indian form *pa yoko na*, "place where there is water." These words are found in the recorded speech of Jemez Pueblo, where in August of 1838 the inhabitants of Pecos fled after an epidemic of disease and an attack by the Comanches. Thus, we have no name derived from the community itself, only a name applied to it by the people in a neighboring pueblo. Of course, some of these people were refugees from Pecos, and they may have carried the name with them. Furthermore, Pecos and Jemez pueblos belong to the same linguistic stock.

A curious name, the etymology of which is in dispute, illustrates further the possible intermingling of Spanish with Indian. It is the name "Canadian" as used for the Canadian River. When Frederick Webb Hodge prepared his *Handbook of American Indians North of*

Mexico (1907), he gave the Caddo Indian word *kanohatino*, "red river," as the name source for the Red River of Louisiana and the Colorado River in south central Texas, *colorado* being Spanish for "red." The Red River of Louisiana, of course, forms the southern boundary line of Oklahoma and extends west through the Panhandle of Texas to the New Mexico state line. North of it is the Canadian River, also called the Red River or the Canadian Red River, which starts in northern New Mexico and flows through Colfax County to form the Mora-Harding county separation, then turns east through San Miguel and Quay counties until it goes across Texas into Oklahoma, where it is known for awhile as the Beaver River. Finally, as the North Canadian River it joins the Arkansas. "Canadian," then, as a place name could be derived from this Caddo word for red. However, in *The Masterkey*, XXIII (May, 1949), p. 91, Dr. Hodge printed a quotation from the journal of Lt. J. W. Abert (29th Congress, 1st Sess., Senate, Washington, 1846, p. 23), describing an excursion to the river and the great cañon through which it flows, and he thus seemed to favor the derivation of the name from Sp. cañada, "ravine," and the original name as *cañadian.* But *Mapa de los Estados Unidos* (1828) shows the stream as *Canadiano Rio*, without the *ñ*, which would favor a Spanish adaptation of the Indian *kanohatino*, "red river." It is the red salt which washes down in time of floods to color the water that is responsible for the descriptive name. Spanish land titles call it the *Rio Rojo*, "red river," as well as the *Rio Canadiano.* In the upper reaches it is today called the Little Red River.

No satisfactory explanation has ever been given for the generic term "Navajo" or "Navaho." The Navajos in their Athapascan tongue call themselves *Diné*, "the people." Where did the Spanish find a name for the Navajos which was not from the Athapascan tongue? There is an arroyo in Santa Fe County called by the Tewa name *na va hu u*, "arroyo of cultivated fields," or "place of planted fields." It has been suggested that this Tewa word may have been used by the Pueblo Indians to describe the *Diné* people to the Spanish, since there are many such cultivated areas in arroyos where the Navajos live.[1] Washington Matthews in *Navaho Legends*,

[1] E. L. Hewett, *American Anthropologist*, n.s. 8:193 (January-March, 1906). Reprinted and discussed in *The Benavides Memorial of 1634*, eds., Hodge, Hammond, Rey (Albuquerque, 1945), pp. 307–308.

page 211, note 1, writes "The name is generally supposed to be derived from [Sp.] *navaja*, which means a clasp-knife or razor and to have been applied because the Navaho warriors carried great stone knives in former days." He also suggests Spanish *navajo* [*lavajo*], "pool or small lake," as a source, but Fray Alonso Benavides in his *Memorial to the King of Spain*, written in 1630, says that the Navajos were great farmers and that the word *Navajo* signified "great planted fields." Since the Spanish lived in close terms with the Pueblos, it seems likely they borrowed the Pueblo word for their Indian neighbors.

It is with the Spanish-English mingling that this onomatoloqist feels the least inadequate. He is familiar with the word processes which occur in both English and Spanish and has a speaking acquaintance with the vocabulary and name resources of each tongue. Still, surprises were not lacking in our *Dictionary* as we worked with these more familiar tongues. At least nine counties in the state of New Mexico have Spanish place names meaning "marshy place" or "little marsh." The toponym is *cienaga*, "marsh," or *cienaguilla*, using the diminutive form; also *cienaguita*, another diminutive. When the early freighters came over the Santa Fe Trail in the mid-nineteenth century, they arrived at a settlement in northeastern New Mexico called *Cienaguilla del Burro*, which may be translated colloquially as "Jackass Swamp." When homesteaders moved in after the Civil War, the name *Cienaga* became Anglicized as "Seneca," possibly with an element of identification and commemoration for all the "Senecas" in such states as New York, Ohio, Illinois and Kansas. Thus, without some historical knowledge, as well as linguistic perspective, the name today might be considered a commemorative of the Roman statesman, essayist, and playwright, Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 B.C. ?–64 A.D.). There is the chance that the English never heard of the Spanish name, but probabilities favor the Spanish origin as it was given a local English pronunciation as "sinagie" or "senagie."

Perhaps the most amazing of these linguistic transformations has occurred with a place name known variously as *Sugarite*, *Chico Rico*, and *Chicorica*. In Colfax County, New Mexico, northeast of the city of Raton, is a high mesa called Sugarite Mesa. Nearby is a creek with the same name and in Raton there is a Sugarite Street. The word sounds like a vein of metal in an ore deposit, but "sugar"

doesn't have any connection with ore, and so one stares at a meaningless word. In a land grant trial held at Denver before the United States District Court, September 13, 1883, a witness testified that the mesa now known as Sugarite was then called *Chicarica Mesa* because of the birds that lived there. They were blue and white spotted birds resembling wild pigeons. The witness, whose name was Jones, said "The Comanches gave the name to the Creek, 'Choco Rico.' The 'choco' is spotted, and 'rico' is a bird. They were birds that lived in the pine timber."[2] A brief glossary of Comanche words prepared by a Mexican scholar and published in Spanish some years ago,[3] gives the Comanche word *cocora* as *la gallina, i.e.*, "hen." Professor F. M. Kercheville of the Department of Spanish at the University of New Mexico, points out that the reference could be to "prairie chicken" or to the pheasant known as "road runner," and *cocora* could easily be assimilated to *chicorica.* The step from a Hispanicized-Comanche *chicorica* to traditional Spanish *chico rico* would be almost inevitable.[4] The Spanish word *chico* is an adjective meaning small. It can also be used as a noun, meaning a little boy; *rico* is an adjective meaning "rich, choice, delicious." Native informants in the vicinity say that *chico* may also be associated with a type of low sagebrush. The term is further applied to a small edible nut like the piñon nut. Place name etymologies, therefore, have ranged from "place of abundant sage" and "little rich nut" to "small rich man!"

The gap between *Chicarica* and *Sugarite* is not so wide as it first appears to be. In phonetic terms, the local Spanish pronounce the affricate *ch* as a soft semi-continuant sound and the earliest Anglo pronunciation of Sugarite was *shŏo-gȧ-rēt* not *shŏo-gȧ-rīt.* In fact, *shŏo-gȧ-rēt* is still heard. The transformations in meaning are more startling than those in form. From "place of spotted birds" to "creek of the delicious little nut" or "place of the little rich man" is in the realm of semantic fantasy. But *Chicorica* to *Sugarite* defies no laws of sound shifting. Perhaps the adjustments in meaning are no more unrealistic than the development of the name for a river

[2] W. A. Keleher, *Maxwell Land Grant* (1942), p. 89.

[3] D. Manuel García Rejón, *Vocabulario del Idioma Comanche* (Mexico, Imprenta de Ignacio Cumplido, 1866), pp. 13, 22.

[4] Professor Kercheville suggests that the Indian term is probably an onomatopoetic word like the Spanish *cacarear*, "to cackle."

in Colorado from *Purgatoire* "purgatory" to "Picketwire" or for the London Street name *Route du Roi* to "Rotten Row."

Some of our place names are still in the category of enigmas. I have not yet solved the name for the mountain and city called *Tucumcari.* Post cards sold in the city tell the story of an Apache chieftain named Wautonomah who had a daughter named Kari. She was loved by two Indian braves, Tocom and Tonopah. At the order of her father, they fought over her. Tocom was favored by Kari, and when he was slain by his rival, Kari rushed upon the triumphant suitor and killed him; then she slew herself. The distraught father cried out, "Tocom – Kari" and took his own life. The Writers' Project investigators (Work Projects Administration, Santa Fe, 1936–1940) report that this story was told by the famous Apache chieftain Geronimo. One suspects that if Geronimo didn't read it first on a postcard he heard it from some Anglo-American with a gift for storytelling. Another version relates that the maiden's name was Tucumcari and her father, the Apache chieftain, named the mountain in her honor. At present three etymologies are seriously proposed: (1) that Tucumcari is a Keresan phrase from Zia Pueblo, either *o-ku-wa-re,* "place of sand dunes," or *o-ku-wa-ri,* "wide gap place," and named when the Pueblos went over to the grassy plains to hunt buffalo; (2) a Comanche term for "two fires" since the Comanches report that they used the peak for fire and smoke signals across the valley to the plains; and (3) Apache or Comanche words for "a woman's breast," because of the outline of the peak. In *Vocabulario del Idioma Comanche* written by D. Manuel García Rejón (Mexico: Imprenta de Ignacio Cumplido, 1865), neither the Comanche words for "woman" or "breast" have any resemblance to Tucumcari.[5] However, the Comanche words for "two fires"[6] may lend support to the etymology: *cuchtonaró* "burn," *uah* "two." Two other Comanche words suggest a different name origin: they are the Comanche word for "sheep," *cuajaré,* and the word for "twenty," *tocucuahmanri.* If the Comanches named the area for sheep that grazed there belonging to the land owners

[5] Sp. *mujer,* "woman;" Comanche, *cueh.* Sp. *pecho* (la mama), "breast;" Comanche, *pitzi.*

[6] Sp. *dos,* "two;" Comanche, *uah;* Sp. *quemar,* "burn, make a fire;" Comanche, *cuchtonaró.* A. S. Barnes in *Arizona Place Names* (1935), p. 457: Tumacacori, points out that the Spanish always turned the Papago Indian "ch" to *t,* as Papago *chu-uma kakul,* "tumacacori" and *chuk-shon,* "tucson."

of the great Spanish rants south and east of Las Vegas, they could easily have combined these two words *tocucuahmanri cuajare* to name the place. "Twenty" may be the Indian generalized term for plurality. The Comanches raided the grazing herds of Spanish sheepherders in this area. The name may be "many sheep place."

South of San Ildefonso pueblo in New Mexico is a high basaltic mesa near which the Indians say the giant Tsahveeyo lived. This giant was said to prey upon children in the pueblo. He was finally slain by the Twin War Gods, who as children allowed Tsahveeyo to gulp them down; then they cut open his stomach and destroyed him. The Spanish name of the mesa is *gigantes*, "giants." Certainly before naming the spot the early settlers learned of the background in Indian lore. Of course, *gigantes* may appear as a Spanish surname, but it is rare in New Mexico. In fact, I know of no family by the name ever having lived in the state. A final illustration of language interplay is the naming of a creek in Rio Arriba County, north of the state capital of Santa Fe. It is called Coyote Creek in both the Spanish and the Indian languages. The Tewa terms are *nday*, "coyote," *poi*, "water, creek." Learning that the Tewa frequently use animals as subjects for geographical features, one concludes that the name was probably translated into Spanish rather than vice versa. The same line of reasoning applies to the name *Crystal* given to a trading post and settlement located on the Navajo Reservation in San Juan County. The Navajo name is *tquiltsili*, "crystal water flows out." The English name is probably derived from the Navajo.

As minor complexities in preparing this *Dictionary* were the use of *el* and *la*, *los* and *las* before nouns in the more formal syntax of the Spanish language. *El Rio de las Vacas*, "the river of the cows," could appear on maps in this form, or as *Rio de Vacas*, *Rio Las Vacas* or *Vacas River*. *Las Trampas*, "the traps," is sometimes dignified with *Las* and sometimes called just *Trampas*. The Spanish-English and English-Spanish parallelism continued in "cañon" and "canyon;" Cañon Blanco or White Canyon, Cañon de Manuelito or Manuel's Canyon, etc. The tilde *ñ* caused us considerable grief, for none of the American English cartographers make use of it and *Peña Blanca*, "white rock," is usually *Pena Blanca*, "pē′nȧ blän′ḳȧ," instead of "pān ya;" *Cañada*, "kän-yä′dȧ," is "kă′nȧ-dȧ;" *Cañoncita*, "kän-yôn-sē′tȧ" is "kăn-nŏn-sē′tȧ." *Española* is "ĕs-păn-ō′lȧ" instead of "ĕs-pän-yō′lȧ." The use of accents in marking Spanish

place names was solved by simply omitting all of them in printing the place names and then marking pronunciations in the generally accepted terms, sometimes giving variants as "mă'drĭd" for *madrid* and "kī'yōt" for *Coyote.*

The Spanish *b* and *v* interchange made trouble, too. The two letters represent the same sound in Spanish and are pronounced exactly alike, but in initial position the sound is a softly pronounced plosive or stop; between vowels and before semivowels, it is a continuant. In the spelling of New Mexican place names Spanish *b* and *v* are interchangeable, *i.e.*, *Cordoba*, *Cordova*, *Gabilan*, *Gavilan*, *Laborcita*, *Lavorcita.* Where the New Mexican spelling had a strong preference we kept it. Where the prejudice in favor of the regionalism was not very strong, we substituted the standard Spanish *v* form. English *k* for Spanish *que* was another substitution which produced inconsistencies, *i.e.*, *Bosque*, *Bosky*, *Cuesta*, *Questa.* We weren't surprized in our confused linguistic world to hear the Jicarilla Apaches called the "Hickory" Indians, and we have not yet decided whether to record such pronunciations for *Santa Fe* as "sän'tà fē" or for *Raton* as "ratōo'n."

In conclusion, I would like to point out that even the name of the region and state – New Mexico – is a polyglot term. The name is of Nahuatl derivation, being *Mexitli*, an early name for Tenochtitlan, the capital city of the Aztec nation. The Nahuatl Indians were called *Azteca* from *Aztlán*, their traditional place of origin, or *Méxicas* from *Mexi*, their traditional leader when they migrated to the Valley of Mexico. *Cíbola* and *Quivira* were early names for the western area of the United States, but in 1562 a new province was created to the north of Central Mexico and it was called Nueva Vizcaya. The first governor, Don Francisco de Íbarra, seems to have been the first person to refer to the region farther north as a "nuevo Méjico." In 1598, when Don Juan de Oñate brought settlers to the area he called himself (as translated) "governor, capitan-general, and adelantado of New Mexico and of its kingdoms and provinces, as well as those in its vicinity and contiguous thereto." Thus from Aztec Indian *Mexitli* to American Spanish *Nuevo Méjico* to American English, "New Mexico," the name of the State has evolved as a typical illustration of the polyglot which will be called *The New Mexico Place Name Dictionary.*

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