

Uruguay

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(The Problem of Etymology of Place Names of Guarani Origin)

URUGUAY IS ONE OF THE VERY FEW REGIONS OF LATIN AMERICA with no indigenous population. At the time of Spanish conquest, the country was inhabited by Indians of uncertain origin, who presumably were in contact with the Guarani family.¹ Insofar as no actual mixture occurred between Indians and the white conquerors, there are only a few words of Indian origin in the present-day Spanish dialect of this country. In spite of the discussion concerning racial origin of these tribes which has been mentioned in note 1, it is undeniable that almost all these borrowings are unmistakably taken from Guarani. This becomes clear not only through analyzing their form and contents, but also because of the fact that a good number of these words are widely used in Guarani-speaking regions like Paraguay, North-Eastern Argentina and bordering zones of Brazil.²

All these borrowings can be classed, with very few if any exceptions, into three lexical fields:

- a) Plant names
- b) Animal names
- c) Place names

¹ Taking into account the clearly Guarani character of Uruguayan toponymics, many scholars supported the theory that the country had been inhabited by Guarani Indians. Juan M. de la Sota (*Historia del territorio oriental del Uruguay*, Montevideo, 1841) has been the first supporter of this idea. It seems now, however, that the frequency of Guarani names is due to the utilization of that language as *lingua generalis*, i.e. Spaniards were in contact with the Indians of the diverse tribes only through Guarani-speaking interpreters. An up-to-date general view of the theories concerning racial origin of Uruguayan Indians can be found in Olaf Blixen, *Acerca de la supuesta filiación arawak de las lenguas indígenas del Uruguay*, Montevideo 1958. One fact remains, however, unchanged: place names are taken from Guarani.

² Thus, *Sarandí*, *Mburucuyá*, *Yatay*, *Arazatí*, *Caraguatay*, etc., are frequent in Paraguay, Brazil and some provinces of Argentina, just like in Uruguay.

As in other cases of bilingualism due to conquest or to migration, these three semantic fields are the most receptive to loan-words from the autochthonous languages. For this reason, about 80 % of Uruguayan place names of the earliest periods of conquest and colonization are of Guaraní origin.

Since Guaraní dialects are agglutinant, it is almost impossible for Spanish-speakers to interpret their individual words correctly. As a result, most place names are scarcely comprehensible for the present-date population. Consequently scholars try to find the original meaning of these place names by analyzing them, mostly with the aid of Guaraní-Spanish dictionaries, very often decomposing them syllable by syllable, or even phoneme by phoneme.³ It is our purpose to show here that this method is inadequate and lacks scientific rigorousness.

The name of the country, which is at the same time the name of the principal river,⁴ i. e. *Uruguay*, will give us the best example as to what divergent results can be arrived at by means of such analyses. The name *Uruguay* has been explained in different ways by many scholars. Some of the principal explanations are listed below:

- A) Félix de Azara:⁵ *urú* (a bird) + *gua* "country" + *ĩ* "river",⁶ i. e. "the river in the country where *urú* live"
- B) Fray Antonio Ruiz de Montoya:⁷ *uruguá* "snail" + *ĩ* "river," i. e. "river of the snails"
- C) Bautista C. de Almeida Nogueira:⁸ *irugúá* "canal" + *ĩ* "river," i. e. "the river of the canal." The primary form would have been *Īruguay*

³ This is the same phenomenon which has been pointed out by Madison S. Beeler (*Names V: 4*, 1957, pg. 236). It occurs presumably not only in the United States and in the River Plate region, but also in all the other countries of the continent.

⁴ There is another *Uruguay* river, in the Province of Misiones, Argentina, an affluent to the *Paraná*. The name of the country is taken from that of the river, because *República Oriental del Uruguay* means "the Republic East from the *Uruguay* River."

⁵ *Descripción e historia del Paraguay y del Río de la Plata* (1st edition, 1847), 1943, pg. 34.

⁶ *ĩ* is an unrounded central vowel of the Guaraní dialects.

⁷ *Tesoro de la lengua guaraní* (1st edition, 1640), 1870, pg. 407. This etymology is accepted by Daniel Granada, *Vocabulario Rioplatense Razonado*, Montevideo 1892, s. v. Uruguay.

⁸ In vol. VII of *Annais da Biblioteca Nacional do Rio de Janeiro*.

- D) Some authors explain: *urú* "bird" + *guag* "ornament" + *ĩ* "river," i. e. "river of the painted birds"
- E) J. Zorrilla de San Martín: *urú* "bird" + *wa* "cave" + *ĩ* "river," i. e. "the river flowing from a cave where there are birds"
- F) Arturo R. Campos:⁹ *ĩ* "river, water" + *rugway* "tail," i. e. "the tail (affluent) of the water (sea)"
- G) Buenaventura Caviglia:¹⁰ *urú* "chief" + *gu* "of" + *a* "coming" + *ĩ* "river," i. e. "the river affluent to that of the chief".¹¹

It is apparent that most hypotheses agree in explaining the first part of the name as being *urú*, which, by the way, is not the generic denomination of all birds (called *guirá*, not *urú* in Guaraní), but the name of only one species of small birds which lack intense coloration. This makes hardly believable the explanation as "river of the painted birds." Nogueira's hypothesis is also unlikely, because there are no known canals along Uruguay River. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to reject any of the explanations on the only basis of lack of logical meaning, because Guaraní place names are generally not logically built, at least not from the white man's point of view.¹² On the other hand, from a purely formal standpoint, we must reject the explanations of Nogueira and Campos, who do not take into consideration that the Guaraní unrounded central vowel resulted in Spanish in *i*, not in *u*. The other hypotheses should be accepted or at least allowed to be possible, because they all correspond to the rules of Guaraní word composition. It would be then impossible to find out which one represents truth.

We should therefore try to approach the whole problem from an entirely different standpoint.

This writer should state, first of all, that he has never attempted to specialize in Guaraní or in American linguistics. His interest was occasioned exclusively by the apparent impossibility of knowing the meaning of this place name.

⁹ *Significado etimológico de Paraguay y Uruguay*, Asunción, 1953.

¹⁰ This etymology is accepted by Gutierrez Tibon, *Diccionario de Nombres Propios*, Mexico City 1956, pg. 530, who took it from a letter of Adolfo Berro Garcia.

¹¹ *Urú* would mean here "chief" or "father."

¹² Cf. Madison S. Beeler, *loc. cit.*, pg. 238f., concerning the giving of place-names by the California natives.

We understand, however, that the mistake in all hypotheses listed above consists principally in taking linguistic facts as if they were independent of the speakers' minds. Actually words and phrases cannot always be decomposed like mathematical quantities into prime numbers. In agglutinant languages, $A + B$ do not necessarily equal C , but only if C evokes in the listener's mind the sum of $A + B$. Thus in Hungarian, *has* means "abdomen," *on* means "on", *ló* means "horse," but *hasonló* does not signify only "a horse on the abdomen," but also, and principally, "similar," because listeners normally interpret it as created by a completely different synthesis. Similarly in Guarani there are many possible syntheses which would yield identical phonetic signs but many different meanings. In such circumstances, the only possible equation would be $A + B + \text{convention between speaker and listener} = C$.

In other words, a complex ("agglutinated") word must have a single meaning (or at least a single meaning in a given context) even if there could be two or more possible syntheses from which it could be originated. Such words which do not fulfill this requirement would not be real signs in the Saussurean way. This means that agglutination is not always a reversible process, i. e. analysis, if detached from *living speech*, does not always explain the origin and the meaning of a word.

Bearing this in mind, we must arrive at the conclusion that the only safe way of finding out the original meaning of Guarani place names consists in searching in the *living speech*, because a Guarani word must be *understandable* to a Guarani-speaker. Inasmuch as Guarani is still spoken by a good number of individuals in Paraguay and Argentina, it is not too difficult to investigate the correct etymology.

Accordingly, this writer asked six bilingual (Guarani and Spanish) Paraguayan pupils of his at the 1958 summer courses of the Instituto de Estudios Superiores of Montevideo to translate the word *Uruguay* into Spanish. None of them knew that others were being asked. Nevertheless, all six concurred in translating *uruguay* by "tail of the *urú* bird." Some months later the same question was put to an old Guarani Indian woman (a *chipa*-vender) and to a bilingual soldier in Encarnación (Paraguay), as well as to a fisherman and to a coach-driver at Iguazú, Argentina. All they translated without hesitation "tail of the *urú* bird." This should be conclusive evi-

dence that whenever a Guarani-speaker hears the word *uruguay* he understands "tail of the *urú* bird." This would be then the only acceptable etymology of our place name (probably composed of *urú* *huguái* "tail"), although it is hard to explain how this name has been given to a river. Strange as it may seem, this etymology is not even mentioned in the abundant literature on our subject.

Two points could be used against this etymology: first, that present-date Guarani dialects of Paraguay and Argentina are not necessarily identical to those spoken in Uruguay at the time of Spanish conquest when this place name originated, and second, that place names often correspond to former stages of the language and are, therefore, incomprehensible to present-date speakers (i. e. they are only names), as occurs in many other countries throughout the world. However, the name *Uruguay* exists not only in this country, but also in Argentina and Brasil and, concerning the second objection, we must point out that agglutinant languages generally conserve their phonetic patterns and, therefore, the "meaning" of place names better than other languages. Furthermore, both these objections are also applicable to any of the hypotheses hitherto proposed and, if they were true, they would mean only that we will never be able to find out the etymology of Guarani place names.

We believe therefore that "tail of the *urú* bird" should be accepted as the meaning of *Uruguay*, and that the meaning of the other Guarani place names should likewise be investigated through living Guarani speech.

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