

A LEXICO-SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF THE LANGUAGE OF THE AMERICAN WILD WEST



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The lingo of the American West early on at its formative stage distinctly encompasses a set of registers or diatypes used by the in-groupers identified in this paper as a variation according to use in terms of field, tenor and mode. The terminology of the range has sometimes been spoken of as a dialect, although even some regional differences primarily refer to the modus operandi of ranch affairs or mere functionalism in terms of the setting. Spanish as the source language played a prominent part in the lexis of American English since many a loan word entered it by corruption or as anglicized etyma. Spanish had a considerable influence on the Hispanic borderlands, which is detectable as far as the Northwest. The words of Spanish origin, which are semantically related to specific skills, are grouped as lexemes according to whether they have one or two major lexical categories. A large number of nonstandard expressions and phrases sank into oblivion alongside the historical context, unlike those which have retained and even extended their standard semantic values as single lexical units and free morphemes.

Key words: formative stage, diatype, terminology of the range, regional differences, words of Spanish origin, lexemes, lexical categories, free morphemes.

INTRODUCTION

„The top screw mounted his cutting horse, and, followed by a group of chuck eaters, started to trail a bunch of cattle. The corral rope was on his saddle, next to the sougan, and as he placed a brain tablet in his mouth, his mount began to swallow its head and soon turned the pack.,, (Daily Northwestern, 1927:2).

It is not odd a native speaker of English should think he would want an interpreter at hand in order to fully understand the opening paragraph, to say nothing of the foreign learner of English. A standard dictionary of the English language or American English may be of little use as well. What does it actually mean? „The top ranch hand mounted his horse specially trained to separate an animal from the herd and, followed by a group of trainees from the east,

started to drive a herd of cattle. The rope used to make a corral for the horses at night was on his saddle, next to his bedroll, and as he placed a cigarette in his mouth, his horse began to pitch and soon threw the rider.,,



Many a word of the 19th-century westward-marching American pioneers is still current with a variety of standard semantic values and used in mainstream society, e.g. the lexemes *bonanza*, *brand*, *maverick*, *stampede*...

By contrast, a separate corpus of spoken language is now part of American folklore, particularly rodeo terminology (*bulldogging*, *dogger*, *tail twisting*, *McGonigal*, *Stroud Layout*), recorded in historical dictionaries; guidebooks and guides to American culture in the main.

THE TERMINOLOGY OF THE RANGE

This corpus also encompasses the terminology of the range, the jargon of the mountain man (referred to as *white Indians*) such as *rendezvous* (annual gatherings of the mountain men), *there goes hoss and beaver* (an announcement of bankruptcy having lost at cards), *trap-sack*, *possible-sack* (of the two sacks, the former was a leather bag containing his six traps while the latter contained ammunition, tobacco, moccasins and other essentials also referred to as *possibles*), *to be on one's own hook* (self-employed trapper), euphemisms such as *neck-tie party* (execution by hanging as the 1882 Las Vegas vigilante notice reads), *gone to Texas* (to be on the run trying to avoid arrest), *boot hill* (a burial ground on an elevation intended for those who died a violent death usually in a gunfight), *buffalo chips* (buffalo droppings used as fire fuel on the prairies), idiomatic expressions such as *to turn on a dime* (the ability of a horse to move about quickly and easily), *like the Indian with his pumpkin* (overvalued non-cash barter), *to throw a buffalo in his tracks* (to bring down a buffalo with a single bullet), *Sooners* (those who were overeager to clandestinely stake their claims during the 1889 Oklahoma land rush) and a plethora of slang expressions, terms and phrases to mention but a few: *prairie schooners* (boat-shaped, white-tented wagons which bore resemblance to a sailing ship for its white canvas cover), *bullwhacker* (expert wagon driver), *bush fish* (a rattlesnake which was sometimes on the overlander's menu for want of „better fish,,), *turn-arounds* (pioneers reluctant to continue their journey by wagon train), *road telegraph* (messages left by an overland party and written on a piece of paper, a leather strip or cut into the bark cautioning the oncoming wagon train about any danger that may have lain ahead on the trail), *law dogs* (law and order officials, i.e. sheriffs in charge of county and marshals in charge of town), *to stake a claim* (to mark an area of land with a stake with your name on it as a proof of ownership), *to pan for gold* (to extract gold by using a metal pan), *to jump a claim* (to steal the prospector's gold), *stinker*, *stiff*, *joint*, *greenhorn*, hypokoristics *cavvy*, *ranny*, *soddy*, *waddie*, *waddy*.

The aforementioned lexemes along with a large body of Spanish loan words are altogether determined by the historical context of an unprecedented westward migration, and must be therefore viewed as a singular linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena.

The magnitude and complexity of such an endeavor is best reflected in the fact that

each and every aspect of the settler's life had to be reinvented once he had reached his destination point, which in turn, under the new circumstances, generated a body of specific spoken language which, enriched by regional differences or variations alongside a number of loan words, should be understood as a diatype in terms of field, i.e. the subject matter and setting (overland journey by wagon train, habitation, cattle ranching, fur trade, land and gold rush..) tenor, i.e. the participants and their relationships (pathfinders known also by such names as pathbreakers and trailblazers, overlanders, forty-niners, placer miners, cattle barons, cowboys, mountain men or trappers, ...) and mode, i.e. the channel of communication (spoken language). What's more, not only were the participants from all walks of life, but they were from the four corners of the world. In the process they both created and adopted the lingo by choice, i.e. by embarking on this treacherous and gruelling quest for a better life. More often than not, this lingo is indicative of wry humour and therefore casual on the formality scale in terms of attitude.



Spanish as the source language considerably influenced not only the Hispanic borderlands but also the Northwest in some measure. Although broad-brimmed *Stetson hats* had come in place of sombreros of the Southwest, the Spanish etymon *caviada* (*remuda* in Texas) was reduced to an American English hypocoristic *cavvy* in the Northwest. However, these variations are in some instances determined by the setting in terms of geography. A romanticized idea of „a home in the meadow,, was in effect a far cry from what the so-called „rural myth,, boosters propagated. In densely wooded areas, where timber was in abundance, a settler who could afford such a „luxury,, as to live in a log cabin was called a *tony* and the bed was referred to as a *prairie rascal*. His counterparts *sod-busters* or *nesters* (small farmers), who had populated the treeless plains, took shelter in a structure built of dirt and covered with hay and sod which was known as *soddy*.

The terminology of cattle ranching was employed to describe the cowboy's tasks of a wild *cattle roundup* operations aimed at herding and driving cattle into the corral to be cut out and branded. A contemporary speaker refers to a recognizable type of a product as *brand*, whereas brand in the 19th century was exclusively a mark burned on the skin of a cow as a proof of ownership. Today's consumerism has spawned expressions such as *brand name*, *brand ambassador* and *brand loyalty* while in the olden days a cowboy *rode for the brand* (he was loyal to the outfit he rode for). The reason for branding was to protect cattle from rustlers but *brand blotchers* (brand disguise artists) had perfected the skill of altering the original brands with a device called *running iron* to serve the purpose. To be on the safe side, ranchers devised a resourceful and intricate fail-safe system of ear-clipping, thereby creating a specific set of terms:

Crop was an ear squarely cut off. *Over bit* was a nick on the upper edge. *Under bit* was a nick on the lower edge. *Over slope* was an angling crop on the upper edge. *Under slope* was an angling crop on the lower edge.. *Swallow fork* was a triangular piece cut from the tip. *Jingle bob* (originally the metal piece dangling from the rowel that makes a ringing sound when the spurs move) was an ear split deep.

Few people today except for language specialists and historians have so far learned of colonel Samuel Maverick whose schedule in San Antonio was so cramped to attend to his



cattle on Matagorda Peninsula. Maverick's unbranded Longhorns roamed around southern Texas and before long were labelled as „mavericks of Matagorda,, being a dream come true for a rustler. Samuel Maverick initial disregard for his beef bonanza unwittingly and literally lent his name to form a new word used today to denote a person who thinks and act in an independent way. Although Samuel Maverick was a well-known politician in his day, he was not considered as a political *maverick*.

The demands of shipping livestock to the eastern markets created a number of occupations related to the roundup and cutting out methods and consequently a diversity of trade-related terms such as *trail driving* (to drive cattle over long distances), *trail driver* (cowboy in charge of the cattle while on the trail), *cattle trail* (path beaten through the wilderness for this purpose), *chuckwagon* (freight wagon on cattle trail named after the chuckbox), *chuckbox* (box with a hinged cover intended to store food and kitchen utensils, and located at the rear of the chuckwagon), *chukctimes* (mealtimes), *range boss* (ranch owner on a cattle drive), *roundup boss* (trail foreman), *horse wrangler* (young cowboy in charge of remuda) and a number of words of Spanish origin for the tools of the trade. *Town* and *trail* are free morphemes and appear with a variety of lexemes: *shanty town*, *tent town*, *cowtown*, *cattle-shipment town*, *mining town*, *mountain town*, *trail town*, *gold-rush town*, *gold town*, *ghost town*, *trail drive*, *trail driver*, *cattle trail*.

What sets Dodge City apart from other Western towns in this respect is a group of slang expressions and phrases said to have originated in this cowtown. A buffalo hunter was called a *stinker* for the stench of buffalo hides, a *stiff* was a dead man lying in the streets and a *joint* (place) referred to a cluster of town saloons. How *red-light district* came into life is still debatable. In actuality there was a honky-tonk called Red Light House in Dodge City but it is still open to doubt whether it was red glass in its entrance or railroaders who would take their caboose lanterns while visiting the town's *soiled doves* (prostitutes) also known as *prairie doves* or *red light ladies*. The town also takes pride in the first Boot Hill.

SPANISH AS THE SOURCE LANGUAGE

Having made a significant lexical contribution to the American English variety for a whole range of words of Spanish origin, American Spanish has a standing in its own right especially in the fields of mining and cattle ranching.

The lexeme *bonanza* (meaning good weather in Spanish) exclusively referred to good output of farms, mines and stocks. *Bonanza ranches* were originally opulent ranches that emerged on the Great Plains in the second half of the 19th century. Country newspaper editor-turned-general James Brisbin wrote a book under the title *The Beef Bonanza, or How to Get Rich on the Plains* „...where new states are every year carved out and myriads of people find home and wealth..., (Brown, 1991:292).

The lexeme *stampede* derives from the Spanish etymon *estampida* (uproar) and was used to denote a panick-stricken runaway herd to extend its semantic values in English denoting a group of people moving about in this way as well as pressing somebody to make hasty decisions.

Contrary to such lexical examples there stands a group of Spanish lexemes, such as *cargadore* or *cargador*, which are the two different forms of the same lexeme, *suadera* and *aparejo*), which has either subsided into semi-oblivion or has been consigned to the scrap heap of history alongside the rallying cry of „Westward, ho!“, as well as the historical context of the idea of „Manifest Destiny.“



The New Webster Dictionary of the English Language enters *stevedore* as a person who loads and unloads vessels (from the Spanish etymon *estivador*) but omits to enter *cargador(e)*, which was commonplace at the time, as a person who loads and unloads pack animals, i.e. the head-loader. Such is the case with the long forgotten *aparejo*, i.e. a packsaddle or a pack-cushion on which cargo was laid and *suadera* or a sweat-cloth.

Exploring the Southwest in the 19th century, Americans encountered an already established Mexican culture which would leave the English language a large lexical legacy. Centuries of contact between the southern parts of what would eventually become the United States and Mexico (referred to as *Old Mexico* opposite the then Mexican province of New Mexico) along with the Spanish-speaking inhabitants of Arizona, California and New Mexico, who had originally inhabited these lands prior to the American annexation as a result of the 1846–48 US-Mexican war, would provide American English with a large number of words borrowed from Spanish that were mostly used in reference to cattle ranching, horseback riding and the cowboy's working gear such as *chaps*, *corral*, *lariat*, *quirt*, *rancho*, *rancheria*, *rodeo*, *sombrero*, *vaquero*, *buckaroo*..., to muleteering, i.e. the skill of handling mule pack trains possessed by predominantly Mexican operatives (hence *cargadore*, *aparejo*, *suadera*, *cincha*, *riata*), geological formations like *sierra* (mountain range), *mesa* (flat-topped mountain, „table mountain,“), *cañon* (deep valley or chasm with steep sides), *arroyo* (dry river bed or creek, canyon), which were the quintessential backdrop to the promised land, *adobe* structures (unburnt sun-dried brick) and animals like *burro* (small donkey used as a pack animal), *mustang*, *bronco* or *bronc* (wild horse) as different forms of the same lexeme.

Some of the aforementioned Mexican Spanish terminology (e.g. *cincha*, *corral*, *lariat*, *lazo*, *quirt*, *stampede*...) entered American English by corruption or the omission of the phonemes „a,“ or „e,“ (*cincha-cinch*, hence *to cinch up*, *estampida-stampede*, *cuarta-quirt*, *vaquero-buckaroo*...) while others retained their Spanish wordforms but were anglicized, e.g. *amigo*, *gringo*, *latigo*, *sombrero*, *rodeo*, *hondo*, *vaquero*, i.e. all pronounced with the English diphthong [ou] or the „long,“ sound of the letter „o,“. The euphonious „o,“ sound qualify these lexical items for beautiful words.

Buckaroo (mostly used by the easterners as a pejorative term which would not be given a warm welcome in Texas) is the corrupted Spanish term for a *vaquero* or a *cowboy* also known by a number of slang names like *ranahan* or *ranny*, *saddle-warmer*, *saddle-slicer*, *leather-pounder*, *cow-poke*, *cow-prod*, *cow-hand* or *waddie* (not used in Texas).

The Spanish etymon *chaparajos* or *chaparreras* originates from Spanish *chaparro* or evergreen oak. Hence the word for the thick undergrowth indigenous to the Southwest called *chaparral*. *Chaparajos* is abbreviated as *chaps* in American English and frequently mispronounced with a [tʃ] sound as in „change,“ whereas the authentic pronunciation in the American West was with a „[ʃ],“ sound as in „ship,“. *Chaps* are leather coverings for the legs



buckled on over trousers and intended to protect the legs of cowboys if they should come into contact with prickly vegetation such as cacti, thorns and the heavy undergrowth like chaparral as well as against the cold especially in Montana and Wyoming where they were called *angora chaps* or *woollies*. Short fringed chaps are called *chinks* pronounced with a [tʃ] sound.

The word *corral* is probably of the Iberian origin although its Spanish etymon is rather obscure. On the other hand there is no proof that *corral* itself is at all related to Spanish and Portuguese words such as *corro*, *coro*, etc. In the West *corral* is not only a fenced enclosure for keeping livestock and horses but was also used to denote an enclosure made with canvas-covered wagons for defense of an encampment. A half-breed George Bent living with a band of Cheyennes during the 1860s gave a brazen account of their plight „retaliating in the only way they knew how-....., and forcing the freighters to corral their trains and fight., (Brown, 1991:74-75).

The forms *lariat* or *riata* both certainly proceed from the Spanish substantive verb *la reata*, this word being derived from the Spanish verbs *atar*, *reatar* „to reattach,,, „to retie., (from Latin *aptare*). The forms written with „i,, (*lariat*, *riata*) were probably influenced by the anglicized pronunciation of the phoneme/grapheme „e,,. The word refers to a rope of hand-braided leather thongs. Frederick Ruxton calls it in 1846 a skin-rope with which he tied up his horse and mules. *Lariat* is also used interchangeably with *lasso* and *maguey* (agave in Spanish) which is made of agave or hemp fiber. A Tom Horn was famed in open prairie country for „braiding intricate horse hair riatas., (Brown, 1991:345) The lexemes *lariat* and *riata* are in effect two different forms of the same Spanish etymon *la reata*. The original Spanish gender distinction made in the article (*la*) had not disappeared. It is pronounced as a single word in *lariat*, whereas it is omitted in *riata* as well as the phoneme „a,, in *lariat*. The Spanish etymon *cuarta* to denote a forked type of riding stock whip with braided rawhide lash gave by corruption the lexeme *quirt*. *Rancho* is Spanish American for a ranch meaning settlement or cattle breeding station and should not be mistaken for *rancheria* which is the workers' quarters of a ranch. It is also used to denote a native village or dwellings less permanent than the pueblos (also referred to as *home rancherias* of Native Americans).

The Spanish word *la remuda* meaning „to change,,, „to spare., (e.g. cloths, animals...) refers to a herd of horses indispensable for a cattle drive (*cavvy* in the Northwest). This substantive is related to the older verbal forms *mudar*, *remudar* (from Latin *mutare* „to change,,). Noteworthy is the fact that George Frederick Ruxton uses the term *cavallada* in 1847 as an acronym for the Spanish lexemes *caviada* and *mulada* since his herd consisted of both the horses and the mules.

Although a century and a half apart, the mule as a pack animal and the aircraft have one technical term in common. Namely, *cincha* or *cinch* is a strap that goes under a horse's or a mule's belly intended to secure the packsaddle. Should his plane encounter some turbulence, a modern airline passenger will be formally asked to fasten his seat belt, and the passenger is likely to informally think he'd better *cinch up*.

The lexemes *bränd*, *cinch(up)*, *corral*, *lasso*, *maverick*, *quirt* and *stampede* have two major lexical categories and appear as predictable lexical verbs representing the four

wordforms contrary to the lexemes *adobe*, *bonanza* and *lariat* which have one major lexical category. The lexeme *lasso* (Spanish *lazo*) changes its lexical class by adding a derivational suffix morpheme *-er* (*lassoer*). *Chaps*, for example, is a lexical unit with two lexical forms representing the two wordforms: *chaps* (invariable summation plural) and *wooly-chapped*, *leather-chapped* (compound adjective). *Adobe*, *brand*, *bonanza* and *joint* stand alone but as free morphemes they appear with some other lexemes (*adobe church*, *adobe fort*, *adobe wall*, *beef bonanza*, *bonanza ranch*..) to eventually extend their semantic values gaining currency in mainstream society as *bonanza month*, *fashion bonanza*, *hamburger joint*, *gambling joint*, *gin joint*.



THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN PHRASEOLOGY

The omission of a unique Indian language based on imagery to conceptualize their world – save for words of American Indian origin such as *hogan* (from Navaho *qoghan*), *powwow* (Algonquian), *squaw*, *tomahawk* (from Virginian Indian *tamahaac*), *totem* (Algonquian *ototeman*), *tepee*, *teepee* or *tipi* (of the Plains Indians), *wampum*, *wigwam* (of the Great Lakes Indians).. - would not do Alexander McQueen's beautiful language justice. *Tomahawk* is an exception in terms of linguistics as it has two major lexical categories.

As is the case with all peoples of long oral tradition, the North American Indian was keenly observant of the dynamics of nature. This is the language preserved through the strenuous efforts made by the official interpreters and recorders ushering it thus into the English lexicon. It abounds with simile, metonymy and epithets.

Motavato of the Southern Cheyennes states that his „shame is as big as the earth....., (Brown, 1991:67), and Mahpiua Luta of the Oglala Sioux ponders „whose voice was first sounded in this land? The voice of the red people....., (Brown, 1991:103).

„Something of the formal beauty, of the strophes and antestrophes, of Apache oratory transcended the gulfs of culture and language;....., (Roberts, 1998:67).

How the North American Indian referred to the twelve periods of a year was largely connected with their geographical position as exemplified in the following phraseology: for the Modocs in the Pacific Northwest, January was the *Ice Moon*, whereas for the Apaches in the Southwest it was the *Time of the Flying Ants*. Teeming with life, the grasslands of the American Midwest that sustained the buffalo were the lifeblood of the Great Plains Indians and thereby a key factor in measuring the passage of time. Hence the *Moon of Cold-Exploding-Trees* (January), the *Moon of Snowblindness* (March), the *Moon of the Red Grass Appearing* (April), the *Drying Grass Moon* (September), the *Deer Rutting Moon* (November).

Such language was also employed to convey hitherto unknown concepts, technical wizardry such as camera and weaponry, spirits, the members of different races, a means of transport and structures. Hence *to take the white road* (to move on the reservation), *good or bad medicine* (good or bad news), *to capture one's spirit in the black image box* (to be photographed), *Shadow Catcher* (photographer), *the gun which speaks twice* (howitzer), *crazy or fire-water* (alcohol) the *Iron Horse* (train), *Soldiers' House* (fort), *White Eyes* for Caucasians and the *Buffalo Soldiers* for the African-American soldiers of the Ninth Cavalry.

CONCLUSION



The lingo of the American West seems to be eluding the definitive linguistic classification, but evidently early on at its formative stage it distinctly encompasses a set of registers or diatypes including even what one might hardly define as legalese along with categories such as the terminology of the range, which originated mainly from the roundup and cattle drives, as well as slang terms (determined by the particular social setting, be it „urban,, or rural) used by the in-groupers identified in this paper sharing occupational and recreational interests whereby it should be understood as a variation according to use. Even with regional differences one cannot speak in terms of dialect, or the dialect of the range as it has been sometimes spoken of, since these regional variations primarily refer to the modus operandi of ranch affairs, e.g. *single-ranch roundup* vs. *pool roundup*. Furthermore, the phrases and words cited in the opening paragraph (*corral rope, swallow its head, mount, turned the pack,..*) connote the realm of cowboy terminology or cowboyese spread across the vast country west of the „Great Muddy,,.

The „legalise,, of the Frontier, be it written or spoken, according to its informal attitude is both a singular linguistic and non-linguistic form unto itself since it need not have presupposed „an educated variety of English,, (Quirk, 1976:6). However, it might have presupposed a variety. It results from an euphemistically grotesque approach (e.g. *grand neck-tie party, short cord and a good drop, hang tree*) even in the case when it seemingly uses the register of the legal profession. In truth there was an unwritten set of rules, which may be defined as a code of conduct on the wagon train, by which the in-groupers, i.e. immigrants had to adhere to given the hardships of such an endeavor in the first half of the nineteenth century. Such register did display the solemnity of a „sworn deposition,, which was rather a pledge or a „gentleman’s agreement,, than a legally-binding act using a set of legal terms.

The tropical spoken language of Native Americans, whose narrative beauty has been passed down to us through the written word of the historical records mollifying thus the rigid archival language, has been outlined in this paper solely on the level of participation.

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LEKSIČKO-SEMANTIČKA ANALIZA JEZIKA AMERIČKOGA DIVLJEG ZAPADA



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Ključne riječi: formativna faza, diatip, terminologija Granice, regionalne razlike, hispanizmi, leksemi, leksičke kategorije, slobodni morfemi