

# Language Curiosities

How American English has been shaped by Spanish



**Presented by:**  
The Queen Sofía Spanish Institute

Hispanic culture in the United States takes many forms, and the legacy of its many Spanish-speaking inhabitants can be seen throughout many aspects of American culture today.

The gastronomy, music, and architecture that Hispanic world has cemented in the USA is culturally significant. However, a powerful mediator that clearly reveals this longstanding legacy is language. This is true not only because the Spanish language has been present in what is now the United States since before the nation's founding, but also because of the indelible mark it has left on American English. In fact, the Spanish language has a great future ahead of itself in the U.S., a country where more and more citizens speak the language.

There are countless words in the American vernacular that have origins in Spanish or passed through Spanish on their way to American English, things as quintessentially American as "rodeos," "mustangs," "barbecues," or "tornadoes." Through uncovering the history of some English words with Spanish origins, we may just find that **the fabric of America is made up of more Spanish threads than once thought possible.**



## Alligator/ *El lagarto*

In all likelihood, the term "alligator" derives directly from the word *el lagarto* (lizard), used in Spanish to describe different reptiles.

Spanish explorers in Florida decided to use this term to refer to these animals during their first voyages and explorations back in the 16th century, which is how it was introduced into English.





## Barbecue/ *Barbacoa*

Another example of Spanish influence on American English is the word “barbecue,” which has its origins in the native languages of the Caribbean and was introduced into English through Spanish. Originally, a barbacoa, the Spanish word for barbecue wasn’t a way of cooking food, but the name of a wooden structure used by the Taíno to smoke their food.

The word *barbacoa* in Spanish, appears written for the first time in documents dating back to 1518, which recorded the first voyages to America. Spanish explorers then brought the Taíno word barbacoa back to Spain.

For a while, *barbacoa* still referred to the structure that food was cooked in, but after a while Spanish-speakers in Spain and throughout the Americas started using it to refer to the process of cooking food in a barbacoa and the cooked food itself

The first known instance of “barbecue” appearing in English print was in 1697. In this case, it referred to the structure as a place for sleeping. However, by 1733, it had started to mean a social gathering during which meat was grilled.

Many people use “barbeque,” “BBQ,” “Bar-B-Que,” and other variations. That said, the official spelling is generally considered to be “barbecue.”





## Breeze/*Brisa*

A breeze is a gentle wind or something that is easy to do. However, the word used in English likely comes from the Spanish word *brisa* or Old Spanish *briza*.

In Spanish, una brisa is defined as a “gentle wind,” a “wind from the north-east,” or a “mild air that on the coasts usually takes two opposite directions. During the day it comes from the sea, and at night from the land.”

The term was widely used in the 16th century by Spanish explorers all around the globe, and many of whom ended up in the Americas. It is thought that over time, the English version "breeze" became popularized in the Americas. Other possible etymological origins of the word could be from Middle English, Proto-Indo-European, or Proto-Germanic. The 1504 attestation (appearance in print) in Spanish is one of the earliest records of the word.

## Bronco/*Bronco*

The word “bronco” comes directly from the Spanish word *bronco* meaning rough or rude. It first appeared in American English around 1850.

“Bronco” commonly refers to a wild or untrained horse that behaves unpredictably, usually by kicking or bucking. The word is sometimes shortened to bronc. The term bronc is also used to describe a rodeo event started around 1900 called bronc riding, where horses (usually mares) try to throw off their rider.

These strong and untamed animals are also the namesake of the Denver Broncos football team and show up on their logo.

# Buckaroo/*Vaquero*

The iconic figure of the cowboy has gone by many other names in American English, including buckaroo; this name comes from Spanish. In the early 1800s, English speakers from the United States began to venture out into the Spanish-speaking region of the Southwest, and in the late 1820s and early 1830s, the words “buckaroo” and “vaquero” start to appear in English.

Buckaroo and vaquero are really the same word. In Spanish, *vaquero* simply means “a man who deals with cows”—that is, a cowboy. It was in California, where the Spanish *vaquero* was Anglicized to buckaroo. Craig M. Carver, author of *American Regional Dialects*, points out that the difference between vaquero and buckaroo also reflect cultural differences between cattlemen in Texas and California.



The United States is home to one of the most iconic canyons in the world, the Grand Canyon in Arizona. A “canyon,” or a deep valley with steep sides comes from the Spanish word *cañon*, which means “tube” or “pipe.”

The word *cañon* was widely used by the early Spanish explorers. Thus, American English borrowed the word from the southern part of North America and adapted it to English eliminating the Spanish “ñ.”

## Canyon/*Cañon*



## Cockroach/*Cucaracha*



The cockroach, an insect whose 3,700 species inspire repugnance in most people, has been with us since the very beginning of humankind.

The name of the insect *cucaracha* appears for the first time in Spanish around the middle of the 16th century, derived from *cuca*, the caterpillar from which some butterflies are born.

This term passed into English in the 17th century, and the Merriam-Webster dictionary attributes the first known usage (attestation) of “cockroach” in today’s definition to 1616.



## Hurricane/*Huracán*

The word "hurricane" came to English directly from Spanish. In this case, it comes from the Spanish *huracán*.

According to the most widespread theory, the word comes from the Taíno *hurikan*. However, there are also other theories that indicate that it may be of Mayan origin. Despite this debate, what is clear is that Indigenous peoples used this word to refer to big storms and meteorological phenomena.

Spanish chroniclers in the Americas reported that the Taíno used it to refer to strong storms. Thus, the word *huracán* came into use in Spanish in the 16th century. We also see it in Portuguese as *furacão*. The term became popular and frequently used in Spanish, and this led to its introduction into English as the word we now know and use frequently: "hurricane."



# Lasso/ *Lazo*

If you've ever seen a cowboy, you will also have seen their iconic lassoes, which is defined as is a loop of rope designed as a restraint to be thrown around a target and tightened when pulled. The word is also a verb; "to lasso" is to throw a loop of rope around something.

The word "lasso" seems to have begun to be used in English in the early nineteenth century. It comes directly from the Spanish word *lazo*, meaning bow or knot.

Lassoes have been used since the beginning of Spanish presence in America, although with differences in usage between the north and south of the continent.

In the case of the USA, the Spanish and later Mexican presence left as a legacy, among many other things, this tool and its name.





## Mustang/*Mesteño*

The English word "mustang," namesake of the famous muscle car, also comes from Spanish. It dates back to the types of horses that came from Spain, called *mesteños*.

Horses had become extinct in North America by the end of the Pleistocene and were reintroduced by the Spanish in the 16th century. The vast American plains and the absence of natural predators contributed to their rapid expansion.

In Spanish, since the 13th century, animals that had no known owner were called *mesteños*. That word was later adopted too in American English and gave rise to the words *mestengo* (Spanish) and "mustang" (English).

The influence of these animals throughout American culture is undeniable and a reminder of the incredible tie between Spain and the United States. Today, the word "mustang" is often used to refer to wild horses in general, but it is important to note that mustangs have specific physical characteristics.



## Rodeo/ *Rodear*

The English word "rodeo" is taken directly from Spanish and it dates back to a pivotal moment of Hispanic influence in what is now the United States.

The Spanish word is derived from the verb *rodear* meaning to surround or go around. The immense influence of Hispanic culture in the U.S., particularly in the Southwest was key to introducing the word into English.

In what was once *Nueva España*, the rodeo was the vaqueros' process of gathering up cattle for various purposes, such as moving them to new pastures, separating the cattle owned by different ranchers, or gathering the cattle.

The term was also used to refer to exhibitions of skills used in the working rodeo. It was this later usage which was adopted into the cowboy tradition of the United States and Canada.



# Stampede/ *Estampida*

“A general scamper of animals on the Western prairies, generally caused by a fright,” is also known as a stampede. This word is a direct adaptation of the Spanish word *estampida*.

The word seems to have entered American English through the influence of Mexican Spanish-speakers in the 18th Century. It is also probable that the Spanish word had a earlier Germanic origin, deriving from the term “stamp.”





## Tornado/ *Tronada*

The United States is the country with the most tornadoes out of any country in the world. “Tornado” has had many spellings and iterations before becoming the word we know and use today. The origin seems to be in the Spanish word *tronada*, which the RAE (Spanish Royal Academy) defines as a thunderstorm.

The Spanish navigators who sailed the waters off the coasts of the Americas in the 16th century began to use *tronada* to refer to the terrible storms that surprised them at sea.

*Tronada* was modified over time, evolving into terms such as “ternado,” “turnado,” and finally “tornado.”

“Tornado” stems from the Latin *tornare*, meaning twisting or turning, and in the 17th century “tornado” began to be more closely identified with the definition of an extremely violent whirlwind.

Finally, in the middle of the 19th century, Americans more concretely defined tornadoes as the so-called “destructive rotating funnel clouds” that rolled over the great plains.



These are just a few examples of the footprint the Spanish language has left on the U.S. and its culture, a country that has a diverse history and in which the Spanish language has had a great impact.

To this extensive list, we can continue to add states such as Florida, Colorado, or California, whose names come directly from Spanish. Likewise, hundreds of U.S. counties and cities have a name with its origin in the language of Cervantes.

This database serves as a reminder of the great historical and cultural ties that unite the Spanish-speaking world with the United States, but it is only the tip of the iceberg.



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