

The Origin of Chicano Spanish *blanquillo* ‘testicle’ (On How Emulated Dyosemy Can Defeat the Purpose of a Euphemism)

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ABSTRACT

The secondary meaning of *huevo*, namely ‘testicle’, has become so prominent in Mexican (including Chicano) Spanish that in its primary meaning (‘egg’) the word has largely gone out of use, *blanquillo* now being the usual way of expressing the meaning ‘egg’ in that variety of the language. However, in Chicano Spanish (= the Spanish of descendants of Mexicans in the Southwestern United States), *blanquillo* too has, as a result of emulated dyosemy, acquired the meaning ‘testicle’: if *huevo* means ‘egg; testicle’ and *blanquillo* means ‘egg’, then, by analogy, *blanquillo* can acquire the meaning ‘testicle’, which it indeed has in Chicano Spanish. Thus, once *blanquillo* came to mean ‘testicle’, the purpose of using that word as a euphemistic substitute for *huevo* ‘egg’ was defeated. As a result, Chicano Spanish now has no word meaning ‘egg’ that does not also mean ‘testicle’.

Key words: etymology, euphemism, Spanish.

A. Introduction

Speech communities differ in the extent to which they tolerate associations held to be vulgar. In certain varieties of Central Yiddish, for example, historical /e/ has gone to /a/ before /r/ (and /x/), so that *fertsn* ‘fourteen’ and *fartsn* ‘to fart’ are homophonous, yet that situation is not felt to be uncomfortable and the two words thus continue to be pronounced identically.

To take a slightly different situation, non-Israeli Hebrew distinguishes *betsa* 'egg' and *eshech* 'testicle' whereas in current Israeli Hebrew, the situation is:

1. *betsa* means 'egg' (in all varieties of Israeli Hebrew) and 'testicle' (informally)¹.
2. *eshech* 'testicle' is a formal word.
3. the language has no word for 'egg' other than *betsa*.
4. by extension, *betsim* (the plural of *betsa*) is also used in informal Israeli Hebrew to mean 'courage, guts, nerve'.²

Because *betsa* means both 'egg' and 'testicle' in Israeli Hebrew, slight discomfort is sometimes felt with using the word. For example, I have heard people in grocery stores in Israel smile or giggle when someone asks the grocer "yesh lecha betsim?," which means 'do you have any eggs?' but is also interpretable as 'do you have testicles?' and 'do you have guts?'. The same question asked of a female grocer ("yesh lach betsim?") may elicit smiles or giggles too.

Yet no attempt is made in Israeli Hebrew to reserve *betsa* only for 'egg' — something which could be achieved by popularizing *eshech* 'testicle'. Rather, *eshech* continues to be a formal word, not heard in everyday speech, and in informal Israeli Hebrew *betsa* continues to have all the meanings mentioned.

The situation in Polish is similar to the one in Israeli Hebrew. The chief meaning of Polish *jeje* is 'egg' and in slang the word also means 'testicle' (I do not know whether the plural is also used in the sense of 'courage, guts, nerve'). I know of no attempt to reserve *jeje* for use only in its literal meaning.

B. Mexican Spanish *blanquillo*

At least in informal Mexican and Paraguayan Spanish, *huevo* 'egg' has acquired the additional meaning of 'testicle'.³ In Mexican Spanish, that co-existence of meanings long ago came to be felt as intolerable, so that the two were separated: for years now, *huevo* has been used in Mexican Spanish only in the sense of 'testicle' and the word for 'egg' in Mexican Spanish is *blanquillo*, literally 'little white one'. As a result of Mexican influence, that

¹ Since translation equivalents should, if possible, be both denotationally and connotationally equivalent, the proper English equivalent of Israeli Hebrew *betsa* in its informal sense is *ball*, but since that English word is polysemous, *testicle* (a formal word, hence not connotationally equivalent) is used here instead. The same applies to *huevo* 'testicle' and *blanquillo* 'testicle'.

² That same semantic development is also seen in informal American English *balls* and informal Spanish *cojones*: 'testicles' → 'courage, guts, nerve'.

³ In informal Venezuelan Spanish, the additional meaning of the word is 'penis'. Another Spanish word which has informally acquired the meanings 'testicle' and 'penis' is *bola*: in Venezuela it has the first meaning and in Paraguay the second one.

separation was adopted at least in Guatemala and Honduras too. At least Honduran Spanish has the idiom *tener tres huevos* 'be a real he-man'.

C. Chicano Spanish *blanquillo*

A phenomenon widespread in the world's languages is emulated dyosemy: if lexeme *x* means 'a; b' and lexeme *y* means 'a', lexeme *y* can, under the influence of lexeme *x*, come to mean 'b' also. That has happened to Chicano Spanish *blanquillo*, which Roberto A. Galván and Richard V. Teschner's *El diccionario del español chicano / The Dictionary of Chicano Spanish* (revised edition, Silver Spring, MD: Institute of Modern Languages, Inc., 1977) lists in these senses:

'(pej.) Anglo-Saxon; (euph.) testicle, ball (vulg.)'

The word also means 'egg' in Chicano Spanish, but that sense is not listed because this is a supplementary dictionary, that is, it lists only those Chicano Spanish lexical usages which Galván and Teschner did not find in "more readily available reference lexicons" (p. v).

Thus, Chicano Spanish *blanquillo* 'egg' → 'egg; testicle' is a change which resulted from emulation of older Chicano Spanish *huevo* 'egg; testicle'. With that change, the purpose for which *blanquillo* was coined — to avoid having one word meaning both 'egg' and 'testicle' — was defeated.

As for the meaning '(pej.) Anglo-Saxon', it is an example of a wider phenomenon: words referring to the genital organs may come to be pejorative words referring to people, other examples being English *cunt*, English *dork*, English *prick*, Yiddish *pots*, Yiddish *shmok*, and Spanish *pendejo*.