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The Coyote's Name in Human Speech

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The Spanish zeal for Christianity in the New World included an inquisitional intolerance that burned to ashes the records of pre-Conquest civilizations. Mexican parchments saved from the sacerdotal fires show the coyote as a frequent hieroglyphic symbol, his figure in varying forms representing, for instance, the ancient town of Coyoacan, a suburb of Mexico City. The name probably means Place-of-the-Coyote-Cult. There certainly was such a cult. The Aztecs had a god called Coyotlinauati, to honor whom they dressed in coyote skins and held fiestas. They believed in another being called Tezcatlipoca, who was supposed to be able to transform himself into a coyote. Thus transformed, Tezcatlipoca often placed himself on the road in front of travelers to warn them of robbers or some other danger ahead.

The Anglo-American policy towards the aborigines of the New World was to push back and kill off. "The only good Indian is a dead Indian," the saying went. Any white man who married an Indian woman, with or without benefit of clergy, was stigmatized "squaw man." The Spanish policy towards the aborigines was to baptize, peonize, and cross-breed. Indians who came under the domination of priests and hidalgos were accurately termed reducidos. These contrasting attitudes towards native human beings were extended to all things native. The English tended to give any new species of fauna or flora the name of whatever in the Old World it resembled, calling "robin," for example, a bird that is not a robin at all, even if it does have a reddish breast. The Spaniards accepted native names for plants and animals to the extent that the English accepted native names for streams. In mixing their blood with that of the indigenes, they ab-
They immediately adopted the Aztec coyotl, in time changing the final $l$ to $e$. While some were lighting fires to destroy Aztec paganism, others were writing to illumine what was being destroyed. For centuries after the Spanish became familiar with the coyote and with the animal’s impression on native minds, their accounts of it were, aside from physical descriptions, little more than collections of native credulities. The first printed description of the coyote is in a Latin work by Francisco Hernández, published at Rome in 1651. In a chapter entitled “Concerning the Coyotl, or Indian Fox,” Hernández wrote:

The coyotl, which certain people think to be the Spanish fox, others the Adipus, and which others regard as a distinct species, is an animal unknown to the Old World, with a wolf-like head, lively large pale eyes, small sharp ears, a long, dark, and not very thick muzzle, sinewy legs with thick crooked nails, and a very thick tail. Its bite is harmful. In short, it approaches in appearance our own fox, to the genus of which it will probably be compared. It is midway between this and the wolf in size, being twice as large as our fox, and smaller than a wolf. It is said to attack and kill not only sheep and similar animals but also stags and sometimes even men. It is covered with long hair, dark and light mixed with one another. It is a keen hunter, like the fox in its ways.

It is a persevering revenger of injuries and, remembering prey once snatched from it, if it recognizes the thief days afterward it will give chase. Sometimes it will even attack a pack of its own breed and if possible bite and kill them. And it may avenge an injury and exact a penalty from some troublesome man by finding out his dwelling place with great perseverance and care and killing some of his domestic animals. But it is grateful to those who do well by it and commonly signifies its good-will by sharing a bit of prey. Looking to its medical value, they say that the pain of extracted teeth may be allayed with the tail of a coyotl. The animal inhabits many regions in New Spain, particularly those tending toward cold and chill climate. Its food consists of weaker animals, maize and other kinds of corn, and sugar cane whenever it finds some. It is captured with traps and snares, and killed with the arrow.

Friar Bernardino de Sahagún began composing his General History of Affairs in New Spain about 1560. Guardians against daylight in human minds considered his work dangerous, however, and it was not printed until 1830. Sahagún was more specific than Hernández in treating of the coyote’s gratefulness “to those who do well by it.” He wrote:
The animal of this country called coyote is very sagacious in waylaying. When he wishes to attack, he first casts his breath over the victim to infect and stupify it. Diabolical, indeed, is the creature. A recent happening is worthy of note.

A traveler on a road saw a coyote, which motioned him with a forepaw to approach. The traveler was frightened of such conduct but went on. Upon nearing the animal, he saw a snake wrapped tightly about its neck, the snake's head in the coyote's armpit. Within himself the traveler said, 'Which of these two should I aid?' He decided to aid the coyote. He picked up a stick and began to strike the snake, which unwound itself, fell to the ground, and fled into the weeds.

The coyote fled also, but in a short while encountered the traveler in a corn field. In his mouth he carried two chickens by the necks, and these he laid at the feet of his rescuer, making motions with his mouth that he should accept them. Then he followed behind the traveler until he arrived at his own house. Two days later the coyote brought him another chicken, a cock.

As has been said, Anglo-American discoverers of the coyote named it "prairie wolf." By 1830 English-speakers were dropping this name and adopting the Mexican. Their spellings of it, like those of Shakespeare's name, took a long time to settle down. Anglicised approaches to the now accepted form included cojote, cuiota, collote, ciote, cayute, cayoti, coyote, koyott, kiote, kiyot. Perhaps there is no single right way for English-speakers to pronounce the word. Like morals, correctness of pronunciation often depends upon latitude or longitude. Historical pronunciation accents all three syllables of the word—co-yo-te; coy-o-te, often abbreviated orally into ky-oht, does well enough.

The impact that human characters and animals make on the popular mind are often reflected in popularization of their names. Doctor Guillotine and the dog are ready examples. No other animal of North America has so penetrated the American-English and Mexican-Spanish languages as the coyote. Mexican place names prefixed and suffixed by coyote illustrate the oldest form of penetration; Coyotepec (Hill of the Coyotes) is an example. In modern Mexican folk sayings and other homely expressions, there are many applications of the coyote's name and nature to human character and activity. And beyond such applications there are numberless superstitions and folk tales in which el coyote dominates.

A coyotera is not only a pack of coyotes and a trap for catching coyotes but a group of people shouting together. Coyotomate, tomato of the coyote, used as a deadener of pain, owes its name to the folk belief that the coyote has power to stupify victims with its breath.
medicinal plants are named after the animal. A desert gourd common to the Southwest as well as to Mexico is called coyote melon and is said to be eaten by coyotes. On the West Coast tabaco del coyote grows wild. Coyote prickly pear (Opuntia imbricata) is called also “candles of the coyote.” The beautiful-leafed coyotillo plant (Karwinska humboldtiana) makes up for lack of thorns by containing an ingredient poisonous to goats, which sometimes eat it; coyotes delight in and thrive on its berries. Often coyote is used as synonym for native, and is applied to Indians and mestizos (mixed-bloods) as readily as to plants.

In Mexican popular speech, coyote means: a pettifogger, a thief, any kind of shyster or go-between, a curbstone broker, a fixer who has “pull” to sell, an oil or mining scout with “practical experience” in selling leases, also the respectable Minister of Mines, a drink of mixed beer and brandy. As Lumholtz puts it, “The regard that the Indians have for their Mexican masters is shown in the name by which they refer to them — coyotes.”

On the border, a smuggler-over of aliens is called a coyote enganchista. In the interior of Texas a certain kind of agent, often a jackleg lawyer, who hangs around court houses and charges ignorant Mexicans outrageous fees for services as commonplace as getting a notary public’s certification is called a coyote. He is often a Mexican himself. In New Mexico, the name, among other meanings, denotes a half-breed — a mixture of Anglo and Hispano bloods or of Caucasian and Indian — who is loyal to neither line. Mexicans call bastard children coyotitos. Without aspersion they call also the last child in a family a coyotito. In the folklore of ignorance — and not all folklore by any means springs from ignorance — the coyote is a cross between lobo and fox.

“Whoever has chickens must watch for coyotes,” is a Mexican saying often applied to the owner of property as well as to the mother of a fair damsel. Another saying, “The coyote won’t get another chicken from me,” asserts more aptitude for learning from experience than human history demonstrates. Not all connotations of coyote are sinister. A shrewd man may be called muy coyote without necessarily implying that he is crooked. Mexican people to whom the Spanish Conquest is still an event of yesterday and who still burn against Spanish oppression remember a pre-Cortez prince who was poet and philosopher as well as wise ruler and was called Nezahualcoyotl (Hungry Coyote) as a compliment to his sagacity. Among English-speakers, however, to call a man a “coyote” is to insult him, though he will purr at being called “foxy.”
At the same time, to “out-coyote” another means little more than to out-smart, to excell at the trickster’s own game.

The mountain ridge called “hog back” by English-speakers is in the Sierra Madre “spine of the coyote.” *Juego del coyote* is a kind of checkerboard game, sometimes played by country Mexicans on marked off ground, between “chickens” on one side and “coyotes” on the other. City Mexicans who have never seen a coyote speak familiarly of the coyote color. Of the many colors of Spanish horses, the *bayo coyote* (dun with stripe down the back), once ridden by range men from Guatemala to the Plains of Alberta, was considered the most hardy and enduring. “The *bayo coyote* will die before he gives up.” The tireless trot of Indians is a coyote trot. In mining lingo of early California, derived from the Mexicans, “coyote holes” or “coyote diggings” were small drift tunnels and shafts, and “to coyote” was to dig in coyote fashion. Nowadays in the Southwest, “coyoting around” means drifting loosely from one place or occupation to another, without anchor or responsibility.

To have “coyote sense” is to have a sense of direction that guides one independently of all landmarks, stars, winds and other externally sensible aids. Here a man is; a spot of earth ten miles away that a saddle blanket would cover in his destination; there are no trails; it is as dark as the inside of a cow. The man goes as directly as the lay of the land will permit, the compass of his consciousness keeping true to the goal. As an old vaquero tried to explain, “Something in my body tells me.” That “something” is the “coyote sense.” More than any other animal, the vaquero people say, the coyote is *muy de campo*. *Campo* includes everything country — wilderness, desert, prairie, brush, cactus, mountain, fields. An *hombre de campo* is frontiersman, woodsman, plainsman, mountaineer, scout, trailer, one who can read all the signs of nature, find any seep of canyon water that a bee can find, in the cold cover his back with his belly, in hunger out-wolf the wolf. All of his senses are sharp, all his instincts alive. The true *hombre de campo* is *muy coyote*, for, beyond all other creatures, the coyote himself is *de campo*. 