Definite and Possible English
Reflexes of Spanish garbanzo ‘chickpea’

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ABSTRACT
Spanish garbanzo is the etymon of at least two English words (calivance and garbanzo), one of which (garbanzo) is in turn the etymon of several American English slargisms meaning ‘[woman’s] breast’.

Key words: English, etymology, Latin, Spanish, slang.

No dictionary at hand lists the English food term calivance, which is found on page 1 of The Just Vengeance of Heaven Exemplified in a Journal Lately Found by Captain Mawson, (Commander of the Ship Compton) on the Island of Ascension, As he was Homeward-bound from India. In which is a full and exact relation of the Author’s being set on Shore there (by Order of the Commodore and Captains of the Dutch Fleet) for a most Enormous Crime he had been guilty of, and the extreme and unparallel’d Hardships. Sufferings and Misery he endured from the Time of his being left there, to that of his death. All wrote with his own Hand, and found lying near the Skeleton. London, Printed: Philadelphia: Re-printed, and Sold by William Bradford, at the Sign of the Bible, in Second, street. M DCCXLVIII.¹ The author was set ashore on 5 May 1725.

Calivance comes from Spanish garbanzo ‘chickpea’.

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¹ The badly proofread title page indeed has Exemplified and Second, street. Its text is in Roman except Dutch and Bible, in Second, street, which are italicized.
English chickpea designates both a certain plant and its seed. In American English, the plant is also known as garbanzo (which comes from Spanish garbanzo) and the seed is also known as garbanzo bean. The earliest known written use of American English garbanzo is dated 1759. In Happy Trails: A Dictionary of Western Expressions (New York, Facts on File, 1994), Robert Hendrickson says that American English garbanzo is “A Spanish word for the chick-pea used in the Southwest” (p. 101). Instead of “Spanish” read “Spanish-origin”\(^2\).

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Current American English slang has garbonzo, which was originally (and still is) a noun meaning ‘bozo, idiot’ and is now also an adjective meaning ‘crazy, idiotic’. A 1982 citation for the noun and a 1989 one for the adjective are given in J.E. Lighter with J. Ball and J. O’Connor. Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang: A-G, vol. 1, New York, Random House, 1994.

Lighter et al. say that garbonzo was probably suggested by English gonzo. This etymology may be better: origin unknown; possibly from American English garbanzo ‘chickpea’, Spanish garbanzo ‘idem’, or both — in allusion to a small brain (compare English birdbrain and, especially, peabrain) or possibly a blend of, on one hand, American English garbanzo, Spanish garbanzo, or both, and, on the other hand, English gonzo.

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This word should be studied with other American English slangisms meaning ‘[a woman’s] breasts’. In the following list, the year indicated is that of the earliest American English citation in Lighter et al. 1994:

I. Words beginning with /b/:
   1. bazooms (1936)
   2. bazookas (1968; attested for 1963 in British English)
   3. bazongas (1972)

\(^2\) Since the Third College Edition of Webster’s New World Dictionary of American English (1988) mentions Pelasgian in its etymology of garbanzo, it is a forced entry, that is, a usage which the dictionary must treat because it is part of its metalanguage. Thus, Pelasgian should either be a main entry or, if not, it should be defined each time it appears in the metalanguage. Yet that dictionary does neither, as a result of which Pelasgian is a hidden lexeme. Another example is Spanish termología in the eighteenth edition of the Diccionario de la lengua española, published by the Royal Spanish Academy in 1956: the word is used on page xiii but is not treated in this dictionary.
4. bazoongas (1973)
5. bazonkas (1987)
6. bazoombas (1989)

II. Words beginning with /g/:
7. gajoungas (1968)
8. gazongas (1978)

III. Words beginning with /ç/:
9. chichis (before 1965)
10. chabobs (1962)
11. chichibangas (before 1988)
12. chalubbies (1972-1976)

Word 1, presumably the oldest of the ones listed here, is the plural of bazoom ‘[woman’s] breast’, which is a transferred use of American English slang bazoom ‘bosom’, which is a blend of English bosom and zoom (the word zoom enters the picture not because of its meaning but to give a jaunty sound to the slangism bazoom; bang plays the same role in word 11).

Word 2 is the plural of bazooka ‘[woman’s] breast’, which is a transferred use of English bazooka ‘tube-shaped, portable rocket launcher that fires an armor-piercing rocket’. Bazooka enters the picture not only because of its meaning (the shape of a woman’s breasts is likened to that of a bazooka) but also because it sounds like bazoom.

Words 3, 4, 5, and 6 are phonological variants of bazookas.

Words 7 is a phonological variant of word 8, which is a phonological variant of word 3.

Lighter et al. say that word 9 comes from Japanese. They presumably reached that conclusion because they found it to be “especially [frequent in United States] military [use] in Far East.” Rather, is not the word from chiches, which in certain varieties of Western Hemispheric Spanish is a slangism meaning ‘[a woman’s] breasts’? We might also consider as a possible etymon Middle English chiche ‘chickpea’ were it not for the fact that an American English slangism first known to have been used a few years before 1965 is unlikely in the extreme to go back to Middle English.

Words 10, 11, and 12 appear to be phonological variants of word 9 (with English bang playing the same role in the formation of word 11 as zoom did in the formation of word 6).

Having seen words 1-12, we realize that garbonza (the singular of garbonzas) may not come straightforwardly from American English garbanzo ‘chickpea’, Spanish garbanzo ‘idem’, or both. Rather, garbonza may be a blend of, on one hand, English garbanzo, Spanish garbanzo, or both, and, on the other hand, at least gazonga (the singular of word 8). In any case, we seem to have come full circle, for the use of garbanzo in the formation of a word
designating an erogenous part of the body has a precedent in Juvenal, who uses Latin *cicer* ‘chickpea’ to designate the testicles or perhaps the penis (Latinists are not sure which): “mangonum pueros vera [...] urit debilitas, follisque pudet cicerisque reflictii” (6.373b in Owen’s edition published in Oxford Classical Texts).

Thus, when etymologists study groups of related words, as we have tried to do here, rather than look at them singly, they can often see a larger picture and thereby arrive at better etymologies. Had we looked at *garbonza* in isolation, we would have concluded that it comes just from American English *garbanzo*, Spanish *garbanzo*, or both, the semantic link being the similarity in shape either between a woman’s breast and a chickpea (the seed) or between a woman’s breast and the pod of the chickpea (the plant).

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In the chapter “Inhabitants of the Alhambra” of Washington Irving’s *The Alhambra* (revised edition, 1851), we read: “Give a Spaniard the shade in summer, and the sun in winter; a little bread, garlic, oil, and *garbances*, an old brown cloak and a guitar, and let the world roll on as it pleases.” Since *garbances* is italicized, Irving intended it to be Spanish, not English. It is thus Spanish *garbanzos* misspelled rather than a variant of English *calivances*. In the 1969 reprint of the revised edition brought out by The Heritage Press (New York), we read in the “Publisher’s Note” that “Irving’s Spanish, as hitherto printed in *The Alhambra*, was rife with errors; these have now been corrected for the first time.” Not all, however, have been rectified, “*garbances*” for *garbanzos* being one of them.