In this work, Eva Bravo-García and M. Teresa Cáceres-Lorenzo have produced an in-depth, contextually-based study of early borrowings of indigenous lexical items into Spanish. The work examines the different types of texts, authors, and discursive contexts resulting from indigenous contact during the early colonial period and compares their tendencies to utilize words of non-Spanish origin in order to determine the likely environment for lexical borrowing. The narrow time period chosen allows for a comprehensive analysis of differing situational contexts and genres while maintaining some basis for logical comparison.

The first chapter is dedicated to introducing the historical context of the two spheres to be examined: the American continent and the Canary Islands. It also presents the methodological approach utilized throughout the rest of the book.

Chapter 2 situates the audience in the communicative context of the American colonization. First the authors survey the different types of text available for analysis, differentiating them by the objectives of the author: to narrate, document, describe, justify, etc, the public or private character of the text, and the level of personal experience of the author: whether author-witness or compiler of second-hand narratives. This is followed by a brief examination of the European vision of the New World and its population: marvelous, untouched, and overwhelmingly unfamiliar. The fifteenth century authors are thus experts in the field by virtue of their personal experience with the New World. Their works reflect not only the authority of experience, but their necessarily different attitudes towards the New World based upon their various roles in the Spanish expansion. Bravo-García and Cáceres-Lorenzo therefore separate their primary source authors into three broad categories: the discoverer/soldier/colonizer, the indigenous or mestizo writer, and the missionary. This chapter emphasizes the contextual factors which differentiate patterns of lexical borrowing. The identity of the author, his role in the conquest and his attitude toward it, his audience and purpose in writing: all these elements have an effect on language use and in particular borrowing of indigenous lexical items.

The following chapter looks at the process of incorporation of American indigenous lexical items into the colonizer’s language, pointing out four factors leading to the permanent integration of a term. These are, in temporal order, communicative utility, semantic precision, aesthetic or expressive preference, and social prestige. Bravo-García and Cáceres-Lorenzo then quantify use of indigenous lexical items by author type and year and discuss the effects of oral and written registers as well as urban/rural and social class distinction.

Chapter 4 moves the discussion to the Canary Islands – what the authors call a “tangential” context. Lexical borrowing in this environment shares some of its characteristics with the American milieu, and thus the authors perform a somewhat parallel analysis. However, the data being much more limited, they distinguish only between official and chronicle-style text types. As was the case in documents from the Americas, the number, usage (are they given with synonyms or do they stand alone), and nature of the guanchismos in each type of text is indicative of both the status of the individual lexical item and lexical borrowing in general at the time. This chapter goes on to relate specific examples of lexical items borrowed into Spanish and their usage and eventual diffusion, with both a quantitative analysis of frequency of usage and a qualitative analysis by topic or sphere (agricultural, religious, etc.).
The final chapter studies the missionary perspective of the Canary Islands, and takes as case studies the works of Bartolomé de Las Casas and Alonso de Espinosa, members of the religious order who were concerned with the situation of the native peoples.

This work reads as a deep historiographical and textual analysis and provides useful quantitative data and classification by context of indigenous lexical borrowings. The authors’ careful contextualization and classification of sources serves as a methodological model for the usage of historical texts as evidence for linguistic phenomena. Bravo-García and Cáceres-Lorenzo have successfully shown the importance and influence of the historical period, text type, and authorial identity and motivation on lexical borrowing in the early Spanish colonial period. However, the extrapolation to a broader theoretical model of sociocultural influences on linguistic borrowing is left for subsequent works.

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