



Latin American Toponyms: An Etymological Study

Topônimos latino-americanos: um estudo etimológico

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Resumo: A elaboração de pesquisas na área da Onomástica, ciência linguística que se dedica aos estudos dos nomes próprios, não deveria se pautar apenas em um viés puramente linguístico, visto que o ato de nomear pessoas, lugares, animais e até objetos não se dá por acaso. Os nomes próprios carregam, em si, a memória e a cultura estabelecida por suas comunidades, fato que se confirma, inclusive, diante da grande afinidade que a Onomástica possui com outras áreas do conhecimento, como a Etimologia, História, Geografia, Antropologia, Sociologia, dentre outros. Para tanto, ela se divide em diversas subáreas, dentre as quais se destacam duas precípuas: a Antroponímia (estudo dos nomes de pessoas) e a Toponímia (estudo dos nomes de lugares), considerando aspectos como origem, forma e evolução. Este estudo trata mais especificamente dos topônimos referentes aos nomes dos países que compõem a América Latina, sob o esteio metodológico da Etimologia. Dessa forma, remonta-se, a partir da consulta a diferentes dicionários etimológicos, como Nascentes (1952), Corominas (1954), Cunha (1996) e Machado (2003), além de outros materiais de apoio, algumas informações sobre como se deu esse processo de nomeação, juntamente com suas possíveis motivações, considerando os aspectos idiossincráticos de cada lugar. É possível perceber que as razões relacionadas às escolhas dos topônimos analisados foram diversas, tais como aspectos físicos/geográficos e/ou culturais, personalidades históricas, religião e, às vezes, até motivações desconhecidas. Tal desconhecimento, contudo, não invalida pesquisas em Onomástica, mas estimula outros estudiosos a continuar buscando suprir tais lacunas.

Palavras-chave: Onomástica; Etimologia; Toponímia; América Latina.

Abstract: The development of research in the field of Onomastics, the linguistic science dedicated to the study of proper names, should not be ruled on a purely linguistic bias, since the act of naming people, places, animals, and even objects is not done by chance. Names themselves carry within them a memory and the culture established by their communities, a fact that is confirmed by the large affinity that Onomastic shares with other areas of knowledge, including Etymology, History, Geography, Anthropology, Sociology, among others. Therefore, Onomastics is divided into several sub-areas, among which the following are the two most fundamental: Anthroponymy (study of names of people) and Toponymy (study of place names), considering aspects such as origin, form, and evolution. This study focuses on Toponyms referring to the names of Latin American countries, under the methodological mainstay of Etymology. In this manner, it attempts to reassemble, from different etymological dictionaries – Nascentes (1952), Corominas (1954), Cunha (1996), and Machado (2003) – in addition to other supporting materials and information about how this process occurred, along with their possible motivations, while considering the idiosyncratic aspects of each place. It is possible to see that the reasons related to the choices of the analyzed toponyms were varied, ranging from physical/geographic and/or cultural aspects, to being based on historical personalities, religion, and sometimes even unknown reasons. The latter, however, does not invalidate surveys in Onomastics, but rather encourages other scholars to continue trying to fill such gaps.

Keywords: Onomastics; Etymology; Toponymy; Latin America.

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1 Introduction

The study of proper names, although commonly disregarded in the realm of linguistics, is a highly profuse medium that seeks to create a more in-depth understanding of social-historical-cultural aspects, given that the onomastic lexicon, to a certain extent, carries with it a vast array of information to portray moments of a specific people on a given day. The act of naming corresponds to an age-old practice, confirmed by the attribution of vocabulary that designates a name to people, animals, places, and even some objects. In this respect, Biderman (1978, p. 139) affirms:

The Lexicon of any language constitutes a vast universe of imprecise and undefined limits. It covers the entire conceptual universe of this language. Any lexical system is the sum of all accumulated experience of a society and of the collection of its culture throughout the ages.

To achieve this, the linguistic science dedicated to the study of proper names is Onomastics, which branches into a wide range of sub-areas, such as Hagionymy, Onionymy, Mitonymy, among others, with Toponymy and Anthroponymy as its two most important branches, in which the majority of studies are concentrated. Anthroponymy is dedicated to the study of people's proper names, while Toponymy, also known by some as "Geographic Onomastics", and the object of this study's analysis, refers to the study of the names of places, both of which take into consideration origin, form, and evolution.

Inserted in an interdisciplinary context, Onomastics offers the possibility of developing overlapping studies with other areas of knowledge, such as Etymology Pragmatics, Geography, History, Paleography, Anthropology, Sociology, Literature, etc. Its strong relation with Etymology will be notable later in this text, since this will act as the guiding light of the analysis of our data by dedicating ourselves to the investigation of the path between the root word or origin and the toponym in question as regards the names of Latin American countries, in such a way as to justify this toponymic research.

It is, however, important to highlight the even greater complexity of conducting an etymological study in Toponymy, especially given the difficulty of conservation, of the veracity of information, and of the abundance of fantasy etymologies that are often seen as absolute truths. In this sense, the etymologist, even if equipped with the best dictionaries, is prone to commit errors, given that the works are also likely to undergo revision. Hence, as Viaro (2011, p. 102) defends: "[...] it is not enough to open an etymological dictionary and read the proposals offered by the authors as a "finished truth". The answers are not ready: the authors disagree among themselves, propose various solutions, choose this or that solution and, not rarely, make mistakes". Thus, we now turn our attention to understanding a bit more about Latin America through the toponymic perspective.

2 Latin America: brief considerations

The expression. “Latin America” is associated much more intimately with economic and social questions from the countries that make up the region than with a merely territorial aspect. It is important to remember that this is not about a continent, but rather an allusion to 20 countries¹ colonized by large maritime empires, represented primarily by Spain and Portugal. Territorially, this includes almost all of Central and South America, more specifically: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, El Salvador, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Uruguay, and Venezuela (not including Guyana, Surinam, and Belize, whose countries’ language is German). Mexico, located in North America, is also part of this territory.

In general, despite the lavish resources of its lands, it is still today a region that suffers from the consequences of their political past, with the remnants of the exploratory colonization of resources and human capital, exported as merchandise to the European continent. Its history knows of the traces of the oppression of the natives who lived there, in addition to the sad reflections left by the years of the slavery of African blacks brought to work on these lands.

Faced with all of this, as well as the great delay in achieving its independence – with the majority having become independent only within the last 200 years – is that, in these countries, one can see problems from poverty, violence, and widespread social inequality (lessened in Cuba due to the socialist economy) to urban insecurity and technological backwardness, issues that characterize them as developing countries.² This having been said, we now move on to the data analysis.

3 Analysis of Latin American Toponyms

Regarding our attempt here to recover the etymological evidence related to the chosen toponyms, the following dictionaries were used: *Dicionário etimológico da língua portuguesa – Tomo II*, Antenor

¹ In this work, the names of countries considered dependencies of Latin American were not analyzed, including: French Guyana and Puerto Rico.

² Information retrieved from the site HowMuch.net, based on the United Nations (UN) report that considers the national *per capita* income as its main, but not only, criterion.

Nascentes (1952); *Dicionário etimológico Nova Fronteira da língua portuguesa*, Antônio Geraldo da Cunha (1996); *Dicionário onomástico etimológico da língua portuguesa*, José Pedro Machado (2003); and *Diccionario crítico etimológico de la lengua castellana*, Corominas (1954), in which some information was found concerning how Latin America countries were named. In addition, other support materials were also consulted, with Otero (2006) being the most fruitful of these. Therefore, the analysis consisted of the study of 20 toponyms, duly consulted (when available) in the aforementioned dictionaries.

It is important, however, to remember that the work with dictionaries is rarely an easy task. In the consulted works, we found some confusing definitions, many times seen as a hunch and presenting discrepancies between them. In many cases, the origin of the researched toponym was simply not found, leaving some gaps in the data analysis. Nevertheless, it is also necessary to remember that lexicographic science, as well as the study of Etymology, are quite laborious and demand great precision, in such a way that they almost always demand an entire life of study on the part of the researcher who dedicates him/herself to them. Thus, it is natural that one is not always able to reach a consensus, especially when faced with the inexistence of reliable information, with the non-solution being preferred to an improper solution.

Therefore, regarding the motivations followed when choosing the toponyms, as will be demonstrated below:

The comparative analysis of Latin American toponyms allows us to establish three basic constants: voices stemming from indigenous languages, toponyms suggested in the time period of the conquest of America by the Europeans, and ‘new’ geographic denominations that are associated with patriotic values (CHESNOKOVA, 2011, p. 14, *our translation*).³

³ In the original Spanish: “El análisis comparativo de topónimos latinoamericanos permite establecer sus tres constantes básicas: voces provenientes de lenguas autóctonas, topónimos surgidos en la época de la conquista de América por los europeos y denominaciones geográficas ‘nuevas’ que se asocian con los valores patrióticos”.

3.1 Argentina

Regarding the etymological origin attributed to this toponym, there appears to be no disagreement in the researched works. In all of them, there is the reference to the Latin root word, *argentum*. Hence, for Nascentes (1952, p. 25):

From the adjective *argentino*, of silver. Lying on the banks of the Rio da Prata (Silver River, in English), q. v. The river received this name in 1526 from the navigator, Sebastião Caboto, because of the silver that the navigator found in the natural setting and that, in reality, had been robbed from the expedition of the Portuguese navigator, Aleixo Garcia.

According to Corominas (1954, p. 262, v. I), for the entry “Argento”: “‘plata’, taken from the Latin *argentum* id. *1st doc.*: 1241. Occasional Latinism that has never been rooted”. According to Cunha (1996, p. 65), the definition of the entry *argêteo*” is linked to “‘silver colored, of silver’ 1572. From the Latin *argentēus* [...]. From the top. *Argentina* [...] From the Latin *argentum*”. Machado (2003, p. 159) brings another piece of geographic information to the entry “Argentina” when he states “[...] From the Span. *Argentina*, top., this of the adj. *argentino*, <<of silver>>, because the country is located on the banks of the Rio da Prata (q.v.) (Silver River, in English); also called *República Platina* (*Silver Republic, in English*)”. Otero (2006, p. 21) also mentions that “The denomination is due to the fact that the conquistadors believed that a great abundance of this mineral [silver] existed in those lands”, which already existed in a poem by Dom Martín del Barco Centenera in 1602.⁴

3.2 Bolivia

As we will see below, many Latin American countries received their names as a way to pay homage to great leaders in their history. This occurred in Bolivia, which acquired this name due to General Simón Bolívar (1783-1830). This fact was easily verified in all of the consulted works. Thus, Nascentes (1952, p. 47) mentions that “‘Bolivia owed its name to Bolívar’ is the inscription that appears on the statue of the hero

⁴ But not for the first time, since “Civitas Argentina”, translated to Spanish in 1565 (OTERO, 2006), had already appeared in Latin documents.

in the Venezuela em La Paz square. The name was given by the Congress to Upper Peru, on August 6, 1825, in homage of the Liberator.” In Cunha (1996, p. 117) we found the entry “bolívar”, which varied “[...] From the anthrop. *Bolívar*, from the name of Simão Bolívar, general and statesman, liberator of Venezuela and Colombia and founder of Bolivia”. Machado (2003, p. 264) also endorses this view when he affirms that in one “Name created from *Bolívar* (q.v.), in homage of the liberator of the better part of South America.”. In Corominas (1954), this toponym was not found.

Otero (2006) also adds that, although Simón Bolívar himself did not agree at first with the partition of the continent to separate this territory from the others that made up the vice-royalty of Rio da Prata, he was later convinced by General Antonio José de Sucre when he proposed that the name *Bolívar* be given to the region. Likewise, as with the name of the country, Sucre, the constitutional capital, also received its name in homage of a great historical figure.

3.3 Brazil

Regarding this toponym, one can observe that there is a certain disagreement among the researched authors concerning its history. The explanation that is found in the realm of common sense is that it was given due to an important economic item of the day, *pau-brasil* (Brazil wood, in English), a tree from which wood was extracted to dye fabrics due to its red color. We know, however, that this question is not so simple and appears to be much older. It is important to highlight that, before this designation, the land on which the first Portuguese landed, on April 22, 1500, also received other names, including *Ilha de Vera Cruz*, *Terra de Vera Cruz* (the substitution of “Island” for “Land” occurred when the Portuguese perceived the broad territorial extension), and *Terra de Santa Cruz*, underscoring, according to Noll (2008), the tendency towards hagnonyms in the toponymy of the New World. Also according to Noll (2008, p. 120): “There arises the impression that a decision between *Santa Cruz* and *Brazil* had occurred only around 1530-40. The name *Brazil* (*land, lands of Brazil*) had actually been common from the beginning among the population, while *Terra de Santa Cruz* was only used officially”. It is a fact that, since the beginning of the 1500’s, the term “Brazil” could already be found even outside of Portugal.

We move on here to what the consulted works tell us. For Nascentes (1952, p. 50):

From the noun adjective *brasil*, adaptation from the Fr. *bresil*, modern *brésil*, corruption from the Ital. *verzino*, name of the red wood employed in dyeing mills [...], known long before the discovery of the country. First «Terra do Brasil» [...], later simply «Brasil». The derivative of *brasa*, widely accepted, is nothing more than a mere popular etymology. [...] The Portuguese trade was more developed with the countries of the Atlantic coast of Europe than with those of the Mediterranean. Hence the word came from the French. That it had already existed in Portugal before the discovery, there is no doubt: «*Nesta terra ha muito brasyll, o qual faz muyto fino vermelho tanto como grã*» (In English: «In this land there is much brazil wood, which makes a fine red like a grain» [...]) The *Vera Cruz* of Cabral, later *Santa Cruz*, from the beginning in the word of mouth of the traffickers of Brazil wood and in the that of everyone became well-known, due to the existence of the red wood, as «terra do brasil» (in English: «the Land of Brazil»).

Diverging as regards the original meaning of the word, but agreeing with Nascentes (1952) concerning the motivation, according to Corominas (1954, p. 512, v. I), “Probably an old derivative of *BRASA*, due to the color contained in the Brazil wood. *Ist doc.*: 13th century [...] For the relationship with the name of Brazil, which appears to derive from a common name referent to the large quantity of Brazil wood that was imported from there [...]”. Corominas (1954) points to the 13th century as that of the first documentation, but he also mentions the references from the Italian “*brasile*” (1198), the French “*brésil*” (12th century), and “*brasill*” (a. 1221). For Cunha (1996, p. 122), “*brasil*” came from “*pau-brasil*”, 14th century. From the It. *brasile*, of controversial origin; ‘*ant.* designation with which the Portuguese name the Indians from Brazil (and their language) used frequently in the plural’ [...]. Machado (2003, p. 280) presents a long definition for the entry “Brazil”, which had already been documented in at least 1377 (despite its appearance in Italian that would point to the 12th century), in which, in summary, he states that:

[...] It is customary to derive this top. from *brasa*, which seems to be a bit strange due to the supposed intervention and presence of a suf. -il, tonic, without its own life in Port., even in its archaic stage

[...] the wood would have reached us by means of Italian traders, the intermediaries, during the final centuries of the Middle Ages, between Western Europe and Asia. I believe that this is why the root word of our s.m. *brasil* is in It. *brasile* [...].

Machado (2003, p. 280) further defends:

It does not seem admissible that the top. *Brazil* is due to the intervention of the Fr., as João Ribeiro intended [...] The use of the s.m. *brasil* in Portugal (as seen, well before 1500) and the fact that, when many, fifteen years after the discovery of the South American region, the same voc. Had already names (certainly in an undefined manner as regards the territorial expansion) that vast zone, makes me agree with the interesting hypothesis put forth by João Ribeiro, for whom the name of his homeland would be «the first Gallicism» received by the Brazilians.

Otero (2006) explains that there are two overriding currents as regards the origin of this toponym. The first refers to the large quantity of the tree known as Brazil wood which, due to its red tint, reminded one of embers, hence the name. By contrast, the second current believes that this explanation is insufficient, given that the name “Brazil” could already be found on maps since 1339. Thus: “The planispheres of the Middle Ages from the cartographers Portulano de Médicis (1351), as well as those from Sollerli and Pinelli, and the maps of Picignno, 1367, showed an island called *Brasil*, *Bracia*, or *Berzil* [...]” (OTERO, 2006, p. 25).

Finally, we also bring the interpretation of Noll (2008), which joins the different versions presented by some of the most consulted dictionaries. Thus, as we have already pointed out, he explains the senses of Cunha, Machado, Nascentes, and *Houaiss*, but he disagrees with these when he claims that:

[...]the Germ. **brasa*, ‘brasa’ must be considered as the base root for *brasil*, due to the association with the red color. One etymological link with the It. *verzino* (ár. *wars*), as defend Machado (DELP, *brasil*) and Battisti/Alessio (DEI, *brasile*) is not sustainable, because neither the phonetic evolution nor the late dating of the first witnesses in the 13th century agree. The hybrid Germanism of *brasile* most likely spread through the Italian and the Medieval Latin (NOLL, 2008, p. 118).

We also registered that the polysemy of the term, which may be associated with the name of the country, to the name of the tree – Brazil wood – and, when in the plural, in reference to the Brazilian Indians, as can be noted in the *Carta de Pedro de Campos Tourinho escrita de Porto Seguro a D. João III (In English: Letter from de Pedro de Campos Tourinho written in Porto Seguro to D. João III)* (1546).

3.4 Chile

A number of versions concerning the origin of this toponym have been found, primarily pointing to a term coming from the native Indian lexicon. According to Nascentes (1952, p. 72), in his long definition:

The name, was primitively applied to the valley of the Aconcágua river [...] If the name was used by the Indians of the country of Aconcágua (which does not appear clearly), it would be possible that it is a reference to the name of the bird tile, *tili* [...] or *thile* [...] which, as a proper name in Mapuche be changed to *chile*. Vicente Carvallo Goyeneche and others presume that this is the root word, which does not seem probable to Lenz because this Bird is uncommon. [...] Anrique & Silva propose the name of the bird *chille* (from mapuche), onomatopoeic of the screech of this species of seagull. If the name was given by the Peruvians, which is not likely, then we have in our hands many words from the languages of Peru. Thus, they propose *chili*, cold, from the ancient Quechua (Valenzuela), *chilli*, confines of the world, from the Aymará (Bertonio). Lenz believes these etymologies to be mere plays on words. Lokotsch, *Amer. Wört.*, 32, also thinks that the Chile etymology is unreliable, it seeming to him that the Quechua is more likely because, in relation to Peru, Chile is the coldest and, what's more, the name, initially, was only applied to the frozen valley of Aconcágua. It is also the name of a Chilean river. It is not possible to determine if the name passed from the region to the river or from the river to the region, observes Lenz quite rightly.

Corominas (1954) points out the correspondence of the word “chile” with the pepper, as does Cunha (1996, p. 178), when he claims that *chile* would be a “‘variety of pepper’, 19th century. From the Cast. *chile*, deriv. from the náuatle *čilli*”. For Machado (2003, p. 406), “From the Span. *Chile*, of obscure origin”. Much like Nascentes (1952), Otero (2006, p. 26-27) also lists a wide range of possibilities:

Some guarantee that it derives from ‘Chili’, term with which the Aymarás Indians designated the Aconcágua valley, meaning ‘place where the land ends’; nevertheless, a translation of the Quechua origin attributes to the term the meaning of ‘cold’ or ‘cold region’. The abbot, Molina, and some philosophers affirm that the name was given to the valley by the first tribes that settled in the region, because in these regions there was an abundance of a bird with yellow spots, called by the Mapuches as Trih, Chi, Aili, Tril, Trile, or Trile, which corresponded to the term ‘Chili’. [...] According to other authors, the name derives from the Aymará term ‘Tili’, which means ‘limit of the world’, with which the Incas designated this country. The word ‘Chile’ would be a corruption of this term, due to the Spanish.

He also mentions that the toponym in question may well come from the name of a an Indian Chief that governed the Aconcágua valley region before colonization and before a group of Mitimaes Indians from the region of Peru, where there was a river with this name (OTERO, 2006). In this sense, one cannot give an absolute affirmation of what the real origin of this toponym was.

3.5 Colombia

This toponym does not appear in Corominas (1954); however, in Cunha (1996), and as Machado (2003, p. 435) tells us, it appears to be clear that Colombia received this name as a means through which to pay homage to the renowned navigator, Christopher Columbus, who, in 1492, landed on the American continent. Nascentes (1952, p. 77) confirms this motivation when he states: “Some want, Aires do Casal says *Cor.*, I, 4, the new world to take from Columbus the name of Colombia, and not what was derived from Amerigo; when many declare that it is a great injustice to give that navigator the honor of having discovered this hemisphere [...] [thus] from 1886 on, *Colombia*”. Otero (2006) endorses this fact when he states that the choice for this toponym was given by Bolívar himself, in an attempt to make amends for the “historic injustice” suffered by Christopher Columbus when, because of Amerigo Vespucci, the name “America” as chosen to represent the continent.

Therefore, a linguistic explanation of the toponyms “Bolivia” and “Colombia” are plausible.

3.6 Costa Rica

For Nascentes (1952, p. 81), this toponym comes “From the *coast* (on the ocean) and from the adjective *rich*, name given by Alvarado, its discoverer, because of the multiple treasures in its soil, but especially because they believed that they could find the much sought-after gold.” In Machado (2003, p. 460-461) we find the justification that “[...] since the Spanish, shortly after its discovery in 1502 by Columbus, verified the value of the territory, even on the coast.” However, we were unable to find further information due to its absence of entry in Corominas (1954) and in Cunha (1996, p. 222), who only mentions the existence “Costarican” as “‘relative to, or native from Costa Rica’ 20th century”.

According to Otero (2006, p. 54):

It appears that the Spanish gave the country the name Costa Rica due to the existence of some gold mines called El Tisingal, located on the Atlantic coast [...]. He also does not discard the possibility that the name derives from the admiration of Christopher Columbus upon observing the exuberant nature and the adornments that the natives used. Other authors attribute the choice of the name to the Spanish conquistador Francisco Fernández de Córdoba, though they disagree with the prior sources as regards the motivations for the choice.

In this sense, according to the consulted authors, this toponym was motivated by geographic questions.

3.7 Cuba

The origin of the name “Cuba” is practically unknown. Nascentes (1952, p. 84) states: “Country of America and island that constitutes the main part of this country. Egli says that it is the name of an Indian city. Lokotsch, *Amer. Wört.*, 43, claims that the meaning of this name is unknown.” Machado (2003, p. 477) mentions that it refers to an indigenous name, but does not reveal greater details. Corominas (1954) and Cunha (1996) do not present this entry from a toponymic perspective.

For Otero (2006, p. 77), “[...] derived from the world ‘ciba’, which in the Siboney language means ‘mountain’, ‘stone’, or ‘grotto’. This is not the only version for the origin of the name Cuba. According to other sources, it may also derive from the Taina word ‘cubanacan’, which means ‘a center’ or ‘central place’; de ‘côa’, which means ‘place’,

from ‘bana’, which can be translated as ‘large’; or even from ‘cubagua’, whose translation is ‘place where there is gold’”. Therefore, the only logical guess that we can reach is that it is a name that comes from the Amerindian lexicon.

3.8 El Salvador

Not found in any consulted dictionary. In Otero (2006, p. 55), one can read that it is a toponym stemming from “San Salvador”, applied to the territory until 1841, “[...] year in which, with its Independence, the representatives of the freed people decided to change the name to El Salvador, given that the predominant religion in the country was Christianity”; therefore, the attribution of the term had a religious reasoning.

3.9 Ecuador

For this toponym, Nascentes (1952, p. 99) claims that it comes “From equator, s. com. Its territory consisted of three departments of Gran Colombia, which separated in May 1830 to constitute the Republic of Ecuador, called as such because the entire extension of its territory is crossed by the equator.” The definition found in the consulted works refer to Machado (2003, p. 570), when he affirms that it is the “*top.* Republic of South America, called as such as it is crossed, in its entire territorial extension, by that maximum circle.” This toponym was not found in Corominas (1954) nor in Cunha (1996). Otero (2006, p. 29) brings some interesting considerations regarding the history related to the origin of this toponym:

The equatorial line passes through some countries of America, Africa, and Oceania, but only one has its name related to it. The origin is the following: when the Paris Academy, in the 18th century, sought to study the shape of the Earth, they requested authorization from the king of Spain to send the scientists Godin Buoger and La Condamine to the only civilized region at that time located on the equator – the Presidency of Quito, colony of Spain at the time – to measure the Earth’s Meridian Arc. After that, this Presidency became known as the Lands of the Equator.

Therefore, there appears to be no controversy that the attribution of this toponym comes from geographic motivations.

3.10 Guatemala

For Nascentes (1952, p. 132), this toponym comes:

From the indigenous word *Quauhtematlan*, which means «place of piles of wood» (Egli, Lokotsch, *Amer. Wört.*, 35). The same Lokotsch also brings the root word from the Tzendal language *U-hate-z-mal-ha*, hill that mines water, explained with the reference to numerous volcanoes and their numerous fissures [...] Villacorta, *Prehistoria e historia antigua de Guatemala* (1938) takes from the *quarchtli*, eagle, and *mallan*, captive.

For Machado (2003, p. 752), the sense found refers to a “Controversial etymology [...] In any case, the current form must have come to use through Span.” Cunha (1996, p. 399) merely informs us with the entry “guatemalteco”, which would refer to “*adj. sm.* ‘relative to Guatemala, natural or inhabitant of this country’ 20th century. From Cast. *guatemalteco*”, which clarifies very little to us. This toponym was also not found in Corominas (1954).

Otero (2006, p. 56) also presents some controversial opinions regarding the origin of this toponym, as follows:

Some guarantee that it derives from the Mayan word a ‘Quauhtemali’, which means ‘rotten tree’, because of a disintegrating tree that the companions of Alvarado found near the capital. Others affirm that it means ‘place of many trees’ [...]. Still others presume that the term derives from the expression. ‘Tzendales U-Hate-Z-Mal-Ha’, which means ‘mountain that vomits water’, given the large quantity of vulcanos that exist in the area [...] Finally, some sources affirm that Iximché, capital of the Cakchiqueles (people of Mayan origin), were called by the Aztecs Tecpán Quauhtlemallan, which means ‘land of abundant forests’, from which the name ‘Guatemala’ is derived.

Hence, despite the discrepancies regarding its meaning, all of the proposals seem to come from a geographic or even territorial perspective.

3.11 Haiti

Nascentes (1952) and Machado (2003, p. 765) use the same definition for this toponym, “[...] which means <<rugged land>>; Lokotsch [...] prefers <<hill>>, <<mountainous>>, 16th century: <<... where the Indians will take them to another (island) that they call *Ahyti...*>>”. Cunha (1996, p. 403) also brings us a definition connected to the entry “haitiano”, when he reveals that it refers to an “*adj. sm.* ‘related to Haiti, native or inhabitant of this country’ 1899. From the *top. Haiti*, voc. which in the indigenous language means ‘mountainous’. Thus, this toponym also finds its motivation in geographic aspects. For Otero (2006, p. 81), “[...] it is a consensus that the natives called it Hayti or Ayiti, a term which means ‘mountainous terrain’, from which the name Haiti is derived.”

3.12 Honduras

The choice of this toponym also seems to be geared toward geographic aspects. Nascentes (1952, p. 142) mentions: “From Span. *hondura*, deep waters. <<The gulf has this name because the first Spaniards, wishing to reach land and not anchor so far off the coast, thanked God for having left such deep waters>>”. Machado (2003, p. 784) also presents the same origin for this toponym, as follows: “*top.* Republic of Central America. From the Span. *Honduras*, to the word <<deep waters>>, related to those found close to the coast of that region by Columbus on his 4th voyage [...] 16th century: <<...& to the port of *Fonduras...*>>, *Galvão*, p. 153”. Cunha (1996, p. 415) only presents the definition for the entry “hondurenho”, where he points out that it refers to an “*adj. sm.* ‘related to Honduras, native or inhabitant of this Central American country’ 20th century. From the Cast. *hondurenho*”. According to Otero (2006, p. 56):

The most loyal version is that in which the name of this country was born from Columbus’s exclamation ‘thank God we left those deep waters (honduras, in Spanish)’, referring to the depths of the sea near the coast, when he reached a protrusion of land that offered a safe haven for his fragile ships, which were escaping a terrible storm.

3.13 Mexico

Nascentes (1952) and Machado (2003) point to the same etymological origin for this toponym, with quite similar writings. Nascentes (1952, p. 200) claims: “From the Nautle *Mexitli*, alias of Uitzilopotxtli, the God of war, and *co*, in, together. Name which the Aztecan city of Tenochtitlan was also called, because of the sanctity of the temple of that God.” In the work of Machado (2003, p. 988) we find that “México” refers to a:

top. City and country of Central America. [...] Initially, it was only the name of the city, previously called *Tenochtillan*. Here Uitziolopotxili, the God of War, was worshiped, alias, in Nautle, *Metzxihco*, that is, *Metz(tli)xith(tli)co*, which, it appears, would mean «in the center of the moon». The considered sanctity of the location ended up making that nickname the name of the site, often used by the Indians. 16th century.

As in other previous cases, in Cunha (1996, p. 519) we only found the definition for the demonym “Mexican”, which states: “*adj. sm.* ‘relative to Mexico’ ‘said to be of, or native or inhabitant of this country’ 17th century. From the *top. Méxic(o + -YEAR)*”. Therefore, this does not refer to a great contribution to our objective.

Otero (2006, p. 111) mentions one of the big problems found when we proposed to study the Etymology when he states: “About the origin of the word ‘Mexico’, Arturo Tena Colunga, after an exhaustive study, lists 45 possible origins from the term and reached the conclusion that too many etymologies have been proposed, each more senseless than the other.” Nonetheless, these proposals can be grouped into two main lines of thinking: one referent to Maguey and another to the Moon. Thus, the defenders from the first theory believe that the first syllable from “Mexico” comes from Náuatle “Metl”, which means “Maguey”, a typical plant. The second syllable came from the representation of the mythical founder of Mexico, carrying a maguey on his shoulders, corresponding to the term “Tzin” or “Tli”, resulting in “Metzin” or “Mextzin”. By contrast, those who are adept to the second theory defend that, in the native language, the natural satellite of Earth was called “Metztli”, which would explain the first syllable. The second syllable, therefore, would come from the term “ixtli” (“face”) or “xictli” (“bellybutton” or “center”), while the third, “co”, would mean “place” or “lake”. And he continues:

According to Alfonso Caso, who bases his work on the reports concerning the founding of Tenochtitlán, when the Aztecs arrived at the lake of the Moon, in the center of this (Anepantla) there was an island whose name was Mexico. For this reason, it can be affirmed that the origin of the word ‘Mexico’ is, according to what has already be said, ‘the center of the lake of the Moon’ (OTERO, 2006, p. 111).

3.14 Nicaragua

This toponym was only found in the works from Nascentes (1952) and Machado (2003), both indicating the same etymological proposal. For this, we present what was found in Machado (2003, p. 1070), when he affirms that “[...] it results from the agglutination of *Nicarao* and the Span. *agua*: «water from Nicarau», Indian chief who lived by a large lake and who surrendered to the conquistador Gil Gonçalves in 1522”. For Otero (2006, p. 58), “The name of the country derives from the name of the Indian chief of the Indian tribe named *Niquiras* ou *Niquiranos*, called *Nicarao*, according to some, and *Nicaragua*, according to others – and some historians affirm that the root of the name means ‘here, near the water’”. Thus, the proposal found here is that this toponym was also attributed as a way to pay homage to an important figure for the region.

3.15 Panama

This toponym is one of the most controversial found in this study. Its origin contains various interpretations, and it was not possible to properly identify which would be the most likely. Nascentes (1952, p. 231) presents some explanations when he states:

The city was founded together with an Indian fisherman’s village in which the assignment sent of Tobago by Pedro Arias de Ávila found strength for his expedition by land, commanded by Dr. Gaspar de Espinosa. It took the name of village, which means in the vernacular «many fish» [...] There are also other root words pointed out: the Tupi *pana’ma*, butterfly [...], the verb cuna *panamaquet*, swing the hammock.

For Corominas (1954, p. 635, v. III): “[...] from the name of the country Panama, from which these hats are exported from South

America, manufactured mainly in the Republic of Ecuador. *Ist doc.*: Acad. 1914 or 1899”. Cunha (1996, p. 575), however, believes that the entry “panamá”, taken as a word from the common lexicon (for this, the first letter is capitalized), refers to “*sm.* ‘male straw hat, with flexible brim and rims’ 1888. From the Fr. *panamá*, derivative of top. *Panamá*”. Machado (2003, p. 1124), finally, claims that it refers to a “*top.* Country, city, isthmus, and channel in Central America. From the Span. *Panamá*, this from the indigenous language, name of the village, of controversial origin and meaning.”

According to Otero (2006, p. 60-61), about the origin of this toponym:

Some say that it is due to a tree called panama, which is very common in this region. Others say that the name is due to the fact that the local population was founded in August, when there are many moths and that ‘Panamá’ means, in the native language, “‘abundance of moths’. The most well-known version is that according to which the name is due to a population of Indian fishermen, who lived near the beach, where the city was first founded, and that the Indians were called Panamá, which meant ‘abundance of fish’. The great chiefs of the Kuna tribe, among them, Nele Kantule, guarantee that the word ‘Panamá’ derives from ‘pannaba’, from the Kuna language, which means ‘very far’, a term that the Indians used when the conquistadors used to ask them where the gold mines were located.

3.16 Paraguay

Nascentes (1952, p. 233) is not completely sure about the origin of this toponym when he affirms that:

«Paraguay, in the end, is a name that no one knows for sure where it comes from. Some think that the designation derives from Indians that used to inhabit the Eastern banks of the river; the Paiaguá nation: Paraguai – river of the Paiaguás. The truth, however, may be with others, those who accept the name for the meaning of: river of palm trees: Paraguá- crown of palms; I, U or Y - water or river. Large palm tree groves clearly cover its margins». B. Caetano, 361, from *para’gwa*, crown, wreath, and *ü*, river, according to Montoya, river of crowns but can also mean «river of parrots».

Machado (2003, p. 1130) confirms that it refers to a word which has its “Origin in indigenous language, but obscure”, while Cunha (1996, p. 580) once again brings information only for the demonym “paraguaio”, which would be: “*adj. sm.* ‘from, or pertaining to, or the inhabitant of Paraguay’ 20th century. From the top. *Paraguai*. The form of *paraguayano* occurs in 1899”. Otero (2006, p. 44) also mentions the difficulty in finding reliable information about this toponym, but presents some alternatives, such as:

According to the Guarani dictionary, ‘Paraguai’ means ‘river of sailors’, since ‘Paraguá’ means ‘sailor’, and ‘I’ or ‘Y’ (depending on the spelling) mean ‘water’ or ‘river’. Other authors affirm that it refers to a corruption of the name of the Indians that inhabited the region, called the payaguás. Many authors affirm that the term ‘Paraguay’ in Guarani means ‘a place with a large river’ or ‘the place with a large river’. To these theories is added another, according to which the word means ‘river of the spring of the sea’ and comes from a pre-Colombian Indian population called Tavaparaguai, which inhabited the land that is today the city of Assunción. [...] Some researchers also suggest other possible origins, such as ‘Para-cua-I’, Indian words that mean ‘water from the Cuacamayo’, or else the joining of ‘paragua’, ‘crown of palms’ and ‘I’, ‘river’, that is, literally, ‘river crowned with palms’. Other translations that can be found are: ‘river that begins in the sea’, ‘arm of the sea’, and ‘place of big waters’.

3.17 Peru

This toponym has no a clearly defined origin. In Nascentes (1952, p. 241), one finds many possible origins for this term:

s. m. country of South America. Of quite dubious origin. The first source to the most reliable alias that refers to this country, Garcilaso de la Veja el Inca, tells us in this *Comentarios Reales*, 1st Part, chap. I, that Balboa, after discovering the Southern Ocean (The Pacific Ocean), sent his ships to explore the South American coast. One of these passed the equator and the ship’s crew, at a certain point, saw an Indian fishing on the banks of a river. Four of them jumped onto land and were able to capture the Indian and take him back to the ship. Upon arriving, they began to ask him questions, that he, of course, did not understand <<tell me

your name, said Garcilaso, saying *Berú*, and added another and said *Pelú*. I mean: «if you ask me what my name is, I call myself *Berú*; and, if you ask me where I was, I say I was in the river. «Because it is well-known that the name *Pelú* in the language of that province is a nickname and means river in common [...] The *Enciclopédia Britânica* informs: apparently from *Biru*, small river on the western coast of Colombia, near where Pizarro landed. From the name of an Indian chief called *Biru* (*Century*) From the *Moho* or *Moxo* (Aruaque family) and meaning «toad» ou «youth» (Valenzuela). Paz Solsán informs: from the Aymarà and Quechua *pillu*, crown of gold and flowers [...] name of the Indian or of its chief, *Pirú*, *Pelú*; name of a river between Panama and Guayaquil [...].

Nascentes (1952, p. 241) points to a documental data, when he states “*WörterI*, informs that Pascoal de Andagoya in 1522 found out that the region to the South of the gulf of S. Miguel was called *Biru* by the natives”. For Cunha (1996, p. 600), there is only reference to the word “peru”, from the common lexicon, which states “*sm.* ‘big domestic poultry bird’ 17th century. Most likely from the top. *Peru* [...]”. Machado (2003, p. 1167) reproduces one of the versions of Nascentes, bringing the most probable hypothesis, which is that of the Indian that was fishing on the river bank when he was captured, but he also confirms that it refers to a toponym of “controversial origin”. Otero (2006) confirms the difficulty in knowing what would be the true origin of this toponym, but mentions that the great majority point to the derivation of the name from the Indian chief, from a river, and from a district, respectively, as follows: “*Berú*”, “*Pelú*”, and “*Birú*”.

3.18 Dominican Republic

Nascentes (1952, p. 91) states, for the entry “*Dominicana*”, “Name taken from that of the capital, the city of *Santo Domingo*” which, in itself, received its name in homage of the Spanish saint Saint Dominique of Guzman, the founder of the Dominican Order. For the entry “*Dominica*”, Nascentes (1952, p. 91) says that it comes “From the Lat. *Dominica*, of the Lord”. For “*dominicano*”, Cunha (1996, p. 276) brings two meanings. The first: “*adj. sm.* ‘it is said to be from either friar or nun, from the order founded in 1216 by St. Dominique and that follows the rules of St. Augustine’ 1844. From the. Lat. Anthro. (*Sanctus*)

Dõmĩñicus ‘St. Dominique, from *domĩnus*’. The second meaning refers to the demonym, which says: “*adj. sm.* ‘relative to, or native of the Republic of St. Dominique, in the Antilles’ 1899. From the Cast. *dominicano*. Cp. DOMINAR”. Machado (2003, p. 514) claims that it refers to a “*top.* Country of Central America, on the island of Haiti. This is called *St. Dominique*, much like the city that became the capital of the new state from which it took its name (republic) *Dominican*”.

Otero (2006) reverts to historical aspects to clarify the origin of this anthroponym. He explains that the entire island (which today corresponds to the territories of Haiti and the Dominican Republic) was given the name “The Spaniard”, due to the funding promoted by Spain, with the capital named “Santo Domingo” (“St. Dominique”). This name, which later began to be used to designate the entire island, was chosen as a way to pay homage to the patron of the Dominican order, who were responsible for the evangelization of the natives. After all of the conflicts that had involved these lands, from the arrival of Columbus in 1492 to its second Proclamation of Independence, the name “Dominican Republic” was consecrated. Therefore, this refers to a toponym motivated by religious questions.

3.19 Uruguay

In Nascentes (1952, p. 308), one reads:

s. m. River and country of South America. From the Guarani. [...] *Uruguay*, in the letter from Diogo Garcia, from 1526, interpreted by TS, 338, as: *uru'a ü*, 1526, interpreted as the river of whelks and snails [...] Martius, 532, viu *u'ru*, corruption of *guira*, *gwa*, and *ü*, water from the bird of many colors [...] Everything is uncertain, The historical element lacks, in absolute terms, to support any of the interpretations.

And he raises another question:

There is a certain correlation between *Paraguay* and *Uruguay* [...] In the end, what frankly exists is the element *ü*, water, river. Did *Uruguay* [in reference to the poem from Basílio da Gama] undergo an analogy to *Paraguay* or was there an assimilation in *Uruguay*? The questions should be resolved together.

In Machado (2003, p. 1448), one reads that it refers to a “*top.* South American country. Obscure Origin: «Everything is uncertain. The historical element lacks in absolute terms, to support any of the interpretations»”, with the form “Uruay” appearing in 1526 (in a letter from Diogo Garcia), as observed by Nascentes (1952), as well as “Uraguai”, from Basílio da Gama, in 1769. For Otero (2006, p. 50), this toponym also comes from the Guarani and would mean “[...] ‘river of snails, since ‘Uraguá’ means ‘sea snail’ or ‘water snail’, since both ‘Y’ and ‘I’, according to the spellings, would mean ‘water’ or ‘river’. Other authors affirm that ‘Uruguai’ means ‘river of the birds or ‘river of beautiful multicolored birds’”. Given the possibilities presented, it seems to have been a toponym that was also motivated by geographic questions, but there is a lack of information to confirm any one of these.

3.20 Venezuela

For this toponym, we bring considerations that are quite similar to those found in Nascentes (1952) and in Machado (2003). First, for Nascentes (1952, p. 312), it refers to a:

s. f. South American country. Discovered by Columbus in 1498, in the following year, it was explored by Hojeda, who gave the name gulf of *Veneza* to the present day Maracaibo, upon seeing on the eastern shore of Lake Maracaibo an Onote Indian tribe, with houses constructed upon stilts [...] The diminutive form is used by Welser and collaborators [...].

For Machado (2003, p. 1466), this toponym would also refer to a:

top. Country of South America. From the Span. *Venezuela*, dimin. of *Veneza*. In 1499, Hojeda gave the name of the gulf of *Veneza* to the present day Maracaibo because of the houses on stilts that he saw on its river banks, a fact also pointed out in the same time period, by por La Cosa e Vespúcio. After, it became more widely known by the diminutive form of *Veneza*.

Otero (2006) also agrees with the origin of the toponym presented above. Thus, it seems that the choice is due to the Spanish navigator, Hojeda, or Alonso de Ojeda, who, upon seeing the place built on stilts, remembered the landscape of *Veneza*, “Venezuela” being its nickname. In this light, it refers once again to a geographic motivation.

4 Final Considerations

Given that Onomastics is a field of study that is strongly linked to social-historical aspects, the objective of the compiled information presented in this article was an attempt to understand a little about the idiosyncrasies of each place, with different languages and cultures, but joined under the same title: Latin Americans. Understanding, whenever possible, the historical events of each region is one of the ways of bringing ourselves closer as a single people, with so many memories and such importance in the world scenario.

We could note that the reasons for the choice of toponyms was due to geographic aspects, the intention of paying homage to an important figure from the region, or for religious reasons. As is well-known, many lexico-onomastic items – venturing to claim that they mainly refer to Toponymy – stem from common lexical items when, many times, after having been consecrated as proper names, begin to “cover” the true motivation behind them, leading to other meanings and disagreements regarding their etymological origin. In this sense, in some cases, we could verify the strong impact of the lexicon from native language upon other languages; however, what was quite clear was the influence of the aspects of colonization that acted directly not only in that concerning the name of each country, but also in the reflections that are still seen today, especially as regards the way the inhabitants of the region live.

It is clear, as illustrated above, that it is not always possible to be absolutely certain about the origin of each toponym, but we would like to point out that, despite the difficulties, there is a broad fascination in conducting studies involving Onomastics and Etymology, thus encouraging other researchers to continue to venture down these paths. In this light, we close with the words from Viaro (2004, p. 14), when he says:

[...] the interest in etymology is a fact, and any etymological explanation clarifies irregularities and complications in such a way that it becomes possible to affirm that etymology possesses a curious capacity, once explained, of being hard to forget, since something that was once unclear now begins to make sense.

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**APPENDIX A – Consultation of Latin American toponyms
in these etymological dictionaries**

	Nascentes (1952)	Corominas (1954)	Cunha (1996)	Machado (2003)
Argentina	X	X	X	X
Bolivia	X	-	X	X
Brazil	X	X	X	X
Chile	X	X	X	X
Colombia	X	-	-	X
Costa Rica	X	-	X	X
Cuba	X	-	-	X
El Salvador	-	-	-	-
Ecuador	X	-	-	X
Guatemala	X	-	-	X
Haiti	X	-	X	X
Honduras	X	-	-	X
Mexico	X	-	-	X
Nicaragua	X	-	-	X
Panama	X	X	X	X
Paraguay	X	-	X	X
Peru	X	-	-	X
Dominican Republic	X	-	X	X
Uruguay	X	-	-	X
Venezuela	X	-	-	X

Source: Author's creation.