



Okra in the Americas: An Object Lesson in Historical Linguistics

Etymologies are not only histories of words but also the documentation of demographic shifts, of cultural change, of the ebb and flow of economies, religion, fashion, food, and folkways. So it is that English *okra* and *gumbo*, Brazilian Portuguese *quiabo*, and Caribbean Spanish *guingambó* and *quimbombó* are all of West African origin, and the transatlantic spread of okra itself provides a metaphor for the black diaspora.

This presentation puts into perspective for researchers the specific etymologies referred to above, together with others which turn out to be at least as intriguing as fiction, and which could have led us to posit incorrect historical pathways if we hadn't been able to witness up-close, at the beginning of the 21st century, lexical diffusion in progress. An important lesson emerges from our exploration of far-flung American Spanish *ocra*, obviously of Niger-Congo origin but indebted not to local enslavement of Africans but to Peace Corps volunteers (in Paraguay), a new niche market for growers of tiny gourmet pods (in Guatemala), and the North American-style salad bars of the aristocracy (in Nicaragua and elsewhere). The post-Colonial existence of okra without black people has its parallels in *callaloo*, *yogurt*, *catsup*, *chocolate*, and a host of other words, in a thousand languages, whose shape may well be the only thing left for future, globalized generations to mark the origin of (and long road traveled by) the foods they signify.

Just as important as the documentation of the linguistic histories themselves, however, are the cultural connections this paper uncovers and the multiple methodologies it employs to do so. The author has made use of face-to-face interviews with Africans, Anglo-Americans, and Latin Americans; digital audio and video recordings; data collection via electronic mail; visits to farms and supermarkets; conversations with cooks, gardeners, and language specialists; Internet searches in English, Spanish, and Portuguese; and that mainstay of historical linguistics, library research. It is argued that the connections highlighted here are critical not only to our understanding of linguistic change through time, but also to a much-needed resurgence of student interest in our area of inquiry and in the tools and procedures we call upon to carry it out.