

## Words with [š] in the Sandoval dictionary: A memex

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Sandoval records the expression *A memeches* as follows:

A MEMECHES, fr. adv. = A upa. A cuestras. En las espaldas. "A cucuche". Se usa con el verbo llevar. "El niño quiere que lo lleves a memeches". A memesch y a memísch, en El Salvador. A tota, en Chile, Véase "Memeches".

For memeches, he gives the following definition:

MEMECHES, f. pl. = Las espaldas. Se usa en la frase "A memeches".

Sandoval also cites a third form with a synonymous meaning:

A TUTO, fr. adv. = "A memeches". Se usa con el verbo llevar. "Todas las indias llevan a tuto a sus hijos".

It is of interest in the context of discussions about the persistence of the alveopalatal fricative [š] that Sandoval refers to the alveopalatal pronunciation of *memech(es)* in Salvadoran Spanish, spelling it not with *x* as is his usual practice but with *sch*. Batres Jáuregui confirms that the expression was used in the late 19th century with the palatal pronunciation in Guatemala as well, recording an entry as follows:

Se dice que uno lleva a otro *a memeches* o *a memish* (en estas palabras indias debe pronunciarse la *sh* como en inglés, en *mesh*) cuando el último va a horcajadas sobre el otro, con la horcadura en la nuca o en la cintura de quien lo lleva.

In Guatemala the expression apparently became less common than the one that Sandoval (but not Batres) records as *A cucuche*:

A CUCUCHE, fr. adv. = A cuestras. A upa. "A memeches". Se usa con el verbo llevar. "Las indias siempre llevan a cucuche a sus hijos". A tota, en Chile.

As we can see from the Batres entry, the meanings of the two forms are not quite the same. At least in Batres' time, the meaning of *memex* or *memix* clearly involved a position in which the legs of the carried individual are separated and forked around the neck or waist of the person doing the carrying. To be carried *a cucuche* implies only that the carried individual be carried on

the back and is usually interpreted to mean carried as indigenous women carry their babies, in a cloth tied across the shoulders.

The post-Sandoval dictionaries record both forms but the *cucuche* form has acquired additional forms and meanings. Armas includes *acucuchar* as a transitive verb meaning *mimar*, *consentir a alguien* 'to coddle or spoil someone' and *hacer cuche* as an expression,

enseñado a los niños como equivalente a "dormir"  
–Nena, váyase ya a *hacer cuche*.

Armas also includes *a memeches* 'cargar al dorso de una persona' with the example – Ponete el niño a memeches, y dejá que lllore. He cites *a tuto* as a synonym of *a memeches*.

Rubio, as usual, has the most detailed entry, and for *A cucuche* he provides the following:

Cargar a una persona, generalmente a un niño o enfermo, en la espalda. En el área rural se acostumbran colocarse a los niños en la espalda sostenidos por un lienzo que se anuda en el pecho de la persona que los carga. A los enfermos se les transporta en silla también, atadas con lienzo o llevadas con mecapal.

Under *memeches*, Rubio's entry reads

"Cargar a memeches." Llevar al niño en la espalda sostenido con un lienzo que pasa por el hombro de un lado y bajo el brazo del otro, para atarse en el pecho. Si el niño es mayorcito se sostiene del cuello de quien lo carga y le pasa las piernas a ambos lados, para que se las sostenga.

Rubio also includes an entry for *A memeches*, defining it simply as *A cucuche*. Like Armas, he has a separate, but minimal, entry for *tuto*, defined as *memeches*.

Morales Pellecer includes three related *cucuche* forms, which suggest a continuation of the processes of semantic and morphological expansion for this form while the others remain stagnant or begins to disappear. He lists *acucuchar* and *hacer cuche*, using the same definitions as Armas. He also includes *acucuche*, now written as a single word and labeled an adverb and with an example that makes clear the meaning now allows for the possibility that the object carried is not a person:

llevar algo sobre la espalda: Vas a tener que llevarte los bultos acucuche, porque no hay bestia de carga.

The current *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* (DRAE 22) does not cite any form of *cucuche* nor *tuto*, but does cite *A memeches* as a locative adverb and a Guatemalanism:

Dicho de llevar las mujeres indígenas a los niños: A la espalda, sujetos con el rebozo, manta, etc.

Some Guatemalan Spanish speakers recognize the form *A memecho* (note vowel regularization), but consider it an archaic word meaning ‘to carry a child on the back’ and synonymous with *a cucuche*, which is in common use. *Hacer cuche* is clearly a form restricted to child language. The *memix* and *memex* variants may now be completely lost, certainly among urban speakers.

As for etymologies, it seems likely to me that the *cucuche* forms are Gallicisms derived from the French verb *coucher* ‘to go to bed.’ Their apparent early 20th-century entry into Guatemalan Spanish supports this timing. There is a humorous reduplicative nickname that may come from this form. It is *Cuchicuchi*, applied to a well-known womanizer “because he sleeps with so many women.”

The *memex* ~ *memix* ~ *memech(es)* forms are more problematic, but are likely, in my opinion to have an indigenous origin. Rubio says as much but without providing any evidence. In fact, Mayan languages are very rich in vocabulary to describe positions, with a special class of roots with meanings such as “on the back,” with forked legs,” or “around the neck or waist.” They routinely occur with verbs such as ‘to carry.’ *Mem* is consistent with the consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) phonological shape of such roots, and *-ex* is potentially a derivational suffix of some sort.

Unfortunately, to date, no probable source language or root has been identified. A Maya colleague, Ajpub’ Pablo García Ixmatá, has done some investigation in languages in the Central part of the country that have often provides indigenous loans to Guatemalan Spanish, such as K’iche’, Kaqchikel, Mam, and Popti’, but has not found any obvious sources. He does note the existence of a common root, *mem-*, ‘silent’ that, with the frequentative suffix *-ex* or *-ix*, would mean ‘to quiet someone often’ (García Ixmatá, personal communication, 22 June 2006). This etymology is not completely convincing, although it is worth noting the high number of indigenous women who have served over the centuries as children’s caretakers. Perhaps the form is derived from a baby talk word related to the meaning of *mem-*. The palatal fricative is found in other baby talk, onomatopoeic, and paralinguistic forms, such as Bix, (H)ux!, and Achix!

Snadoval’s inclusion of an entry for *memeches* defined as shoulders offers another possibility: the word may be related to some indigenous body part word. To date, however, no candidates have emerged. Suggestions would be welcome.