



MIGUEL DANTAS DA CRUZ

Pronunciamento / Pronunciamiento:
etymological roots

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Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa. Av. Professor Aníbal de Bettencourt, 9
1600-189 Lisboa Portugal — analise.social@ics.ul.pt

Pronunciamento/Pronunciamiento: etymological roots. *Pronunciamentos* or *pronunciamientos* (in Portuguese and Spanish, respectively) were common political events in several Ibero-American societies during the Age of Atlantic Revolutions. Known to the general public, these movements have been a recurring subject of research in academia for several decades. Yet, the precise meaning of the words *Pronunciamento* and *pronunciamiento* remains elusive, causing frequent confusion amongst historians from different countries and historiographic traditions. What, ultimately, was a *pronunciamento*? What did people refer to as a *pronunciamiento*? This short essay constitutes an attempt to clarify these doubts, through a return to original sources that are often overlooked: the dictionaries of the time. The essay seeks to explore the lexicographical origins of the word *pronunciamiento*, as well as briefly pondering its incorporation into the political jargon of liberalism.

KEYWORDS: pronunciamiento; dictionaries; Iberia; Latin America; political revolutions; armed forces.

Pronunciamento / Pronunciamiento: raíces etimológicas. *Pronunciamentos* ou *pronunciamientos* (em português e espanhol, respetivamente) foram movimentos políticos característicos das sociedades ibero-americanas da Era das Revoluções Atlânticas. Conhecidos pelo grande público, estes movimentos são tema de investigação recorrente na academia há várias décadas. No entanto, o significado preciso das palavras *pronunciamiento* e *pronunciamento* permanece um tanto indefinido, causando confusão frequente entre historiadores de diferentes países e tradições historiográficas. O que era afinal um *pronunciamento*? A que se referia a palavra? Este pequeno ensaio constitui uma tentativa preliminar de clarificar estas dúvidas, através do regresso a fontes originais muitas vezes esquecidas: os dicionários coevos. O ensaio explora as origens lexicográficas da palavra *pronunciamento*, mas pretende também refletir um pouco sobre a sua incorporação no vocabulário político liberal.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: pronunciamento; dicionários; Península Ibérica; América Latina; revoluções políticas; forças armadas.

Pronunciamento / Pronunciamiento: etymological roots

Few other words are more instantly associated with the Iberian and Latin-American political histories than *pronunciamiento* or *pronunciamento*.¹ The term appears countless times in the primary sources, and it became a significant feature of Latin American culture and a byword for political upheaval on that continent. As a social and political phenomenon, *pronunciamento* is also a recurrent topic in historical research on the early nineteenth-century revolutions, having been studied at great length by such scholars as Julio Busquets (1982), Josefina Zoraida Vázquez (2006), and Will Fowler (2009; 2011; 2016), among many others. Yet unlike many other emerging terms of the changing Ibero-American political vocabulary of the period, we have seldom tried to trace the origins of the word *pronunciamento*.² More precisely, no etymological effort has been made to clarify the roots and developments of the word. Furthermore, we do not know when the word in its most modern sense first came to have widespread use, particularly in Portugal. This short essay constitutes an exploratory analysis of the lexicographical origins of the concept of *pronunciamento*, especially in Portugal and Spain. It also traces its problematic incorporation into nineteenth-century political jargon, highlighting some of the controversies that surrounded its dissemination in Spain and Portugal. The essay concludes by briefly recalling the different meanings that the word has acquired in modern-day scholarship since consensus in response to the

1 The author would like to thank Professor Will Fowler for his comments and suggestions to previous versions of this text. This work was supported by national funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P. – within the framework of the contract programme prescribed by numbers 4, 5, and 6 of article 23 of the D.L. 57/2016 of August 29 and changed by Law 57/2017 of July 19. The author received additional funding from his institution's project (UIDB/50013/2020; UIDP/50013/2020). This text uses both versions of the word: *pronunciamento* when depicting developments in the Portuguese world, and *pronunciamiento* when exploring the evolution of the word in the Hispanic world.

2 See one exception in Fowler (2009, p. 13).

question of “what was a Pronunciamento?,” that was specifically raised by Will Fowler (2011, p. xv), is yet to be found.

Pronunciamento is a fairly recent term. It does not seem to have come into use until the end of the eighteenth century, if not later, both in Europe and in the Americas. It is probably no older than the political event that inspired it: Napoleon Bonaparte’s *coup d’état* of 9 November 1799, in the eighteenth Brumaire of the revolutionary calendar (Zoraida Vázquez, 2006, p. 31). There was no lexicographical treatment of the word either. In his *Vocabulario Português e Latino* (1712-1728), the Theatine cleric Rafael Bluteau, who was born in England but lived in Portugal, makes no reference to *pronunciamento*. Instead, he mentions “pronunção” (pronunciation or pronouncement), which he defines after Cicero’s “[f]ifth part of rhetoric, which consists of action, and the way of speaking and representing what is said.”³ Bluteau also mentions “pronunciar” (to pronounce), which he describes as to “[a]rticulate. To pronounce a letter, a word” (Bluteau, 1720, p. 776). In Spain, around the same period, the famous *Diccionario de autoridades* references the same words, describing them in the same manner. “Pronunciar”, from the Latin “pronunciare” was the “[c]ommunication of the letters or words with the sound of the voice.”⁴

It was not until 1803 that the first reference to *pronunciamento* appeared in a dictionary. Yet, the *Diccionario de la lengua castellana* did not liken it to an act of rebellion, a military insurrection or a broader act of resistance. *Pronunciamento* was simply equated to “pronunciacion” (pronunciation), being defined again as “communication of the letters or words with the sound of the voice” (Real Academia Española, 1803, p. 690).

In 1817, with the age of revolutionary *pronunciamentos* just around the corner, the fifth edition of the *Diccionario de la lengua castellana* finally brought a novelty. *Pronunciamento* was still linked to “pronunciacion”, but now with an added explanation: *pronunciamento* was, according to the Real Academia Española, a “pronunciacion por publicacion,” that is a pronunciation by public announcement (Real Academia Española, 1817, p. 708). This broad and somehow still incomplete definition is reproduced in the 1822, 1832, 1837 and 1843 Spanish dictionaries. It was not incorrect, though. Many armed revolts that occurred in Spain were indeed organized around a political demand that was announced publicly, through a pronunciation.

3 Unless otherwise specified, all translations are my own. In the original: “Quinta parte da retórica, que consiste na ação, e modo de falar e representar o que se diz.” Bluteau (1720, p. 776).

4 In the original “Expresar las letras ò palabras con el sonido de la voz.” Real Academia Española (1737, p. 402).

The new word, *pronunciamiento*, was the result of the syntactic transformation of the verb “to pronounce” (“pronunciarse”) into a noun. But, it should be noted that, for a while, *rompimiento* was probably more widely used to signify what would generally come to be classified as *pronunciamiento*. Rafael Riego was the first to use the latter term profusely, but he was exceptional. It was only by its tenth edition in 1852 that the *Diccionario de la lengua castellana* finally attached to the shorter, sterilized definition, the recognizable element of social and political conflict. *Pronunciamiento* was defined in that edition as an “alzamiento” (a rebellion or an insurrection), but, even then, there is no further explanation (Real Academia Española, 1852, p. 568).

In spite of the persistence of modern military *pronunciamentos* on the political life of Spain, many of its former American colonies and southern Europe in general, the Royal Spanish Academy remained committed to the simplified definition. There seems to have been an undisclosed intention to strip the most contentious aspects from the word and keep the definition simplified. The suppression of an expanded explanation was far from accidental, according to Ramón Joaquín Domínguez (1811-1848), a revolutionary and political exile and the author of the most innovative dictionary in Spain of the mid-nineteenth century, at least from a lexicographical point of view. In his *Diccionario nacional o gran diccionario clásico de la lengua española*, *pronunciamiento* appears as an “insurrectionary movement,” and he poignantly added that it is “a term recently used in Spain to designate with it all the movements that have occurred in a few years up to this point, and which the Academy does not permit.”⁵

The word clearly possessed controversial political undertones in the Spanish political environment and not everyone thought there was any advantage in attributing to it a more refined etymological definition. The word also went through an evolutionary process that made it harder to pin down an exact recognizable definition. In Mexico, by the late 1830s, *pronunciamiento* was used to describe any sort of popular insurrectional action. Elsewhere, it was mainly seen as a praetorian *coup*, a military action against the government.

This ambiguous understanding probably explains why the Royal Spanish Academy took so long to associate *pronunciamiento* specifically with military rebellions. It was only on its fifteenth edition that the *Diccionario de la lengua española*, published in 1925, stated that a *pronunciamiento* was a “rebelión

5 In the original: “Alzamiento ó movimiento insurreccional, voz últimamente usada em España para designar con ella todos los movimientos que han ocurrido de pocos annos á esta parte, y que la Academia no admite.” Domínguez Hervella (1853, p. 1430).

militar,” that is a military rebellion (Real Academia Española, 1925, p. 993). This new lexicographical definition was further developed in 1970 when the Royal Spanish Academy described *pronunciamento* as a “[m]ilitary uprising against the government, promoted by an army chief or other leader.”⁶ In other words, for the Spanish Academy, a *pronunciamento* was always an armed rebellion, but it was an armed rebellion that could be led by civilians.

The first lexicographical assessment of the word *pronunciamento* in a Portuguese dictionary came even later. When it appeared, however, it was immediately connotated with what would be a more familiar definition today. More significant is the Eurocentric remark that the author of the *Grande Dicionário Portugues ou Thezouro da Lingua Portuguesa* (published in 1873) provides. For Friar Domingos Vieira, *pronunciamento* was a “term of history;” it was an “[a]ct of insurrection by a military chief, in the Republic of South America.”⁷ Domingos Vieira could not help but reveal his strong political prejudice: *pronunciamento* was a South American and republican feature, supposedly non-existent in the Europe of the moderate and sophisticated monarchies. He was not alone in this remark, though. Many Europeans, especially in the Protestant world, shared a widespread perception that the new Latin American countries would be unable to join the community of liberal nations. Such a view emerged, to some degree, from previous confessional struggles and the anticatholic campaigns of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Beyond the dictionaries, the word seems to have become more popular in Spain and some of its ex-colonies than in Portugal. It was sufficiently pervasive to prompt Ramón Joaquín Domínguez to correct the Royal Spanish Academy and its misleading definition. In Portugal, *pronunciamento* does not appear in the records of parliamentary debates before the 1840s. It seems that it only became popular due to the deliberate effort of some political factions, as noted by Almeida Garrett, who significantly did not use it in his *Portugal na Balança da Europa* (published in 1830). In a parliamentary session, on 11 August 1842, the famous romantic writer condemned, in his witty style, all those “who like this word so much,” and who wanted to force it on others.⁸ Was Almeida Garrett avoiding an undesirable association of Portugal, filled

6 In the original: “Alzamiento militar contra el gobierno, promovido por um jefe del ejército u outro caudillo.” Real Academia Española (1970, p. 1072).

7 In the original: “Acto de sublevação de um chefe militar, na republica da America meridional.” Vieira (1873, p. 974).

8 Diário da Camara dos Deputados, session number 27, 11 August 1842, Lisbon, 1842, p. 88. <https://debates.parlamento.pt/catalogo/mc/cd/01/01/01/027/1842-08-11/88>.

with political unrest, with the war-torn countries of Latin America? We do not know. We know, however, that just as in Spain, the popularization of the word *pronunciamento*, at least in the most modern sense, was not universally supported even among liberals. If some disregarded it and others resisted or feared its generalized use, others, however, recognised its rhetorical potential, going so far as to press for its adoption in contemporary political vocabulary.

In the meantime, the word was appropriated and processed by modern-day scholarship, although not all historians share the same interpretation, just like the lexicographers before them. For some, like the late Portuguese historian and polemicist Vasco Pulido Valente, *pronunciamento* is always “an intervention by commissioned military officers [...] that seeks to replace a government or regime without violence.”⁹ According to this view, which was influenced by the works of the Spanish historians Miguel Alonso Baquer (1983) and Julio Busquets (1982), a *pronunciamento* must be led by the military officers, and it is mainly, if not exclusively, a military process. The objective is always to overthrow the government. *Pronunciamento* is therefore an alternative word to designate a *coup*. This is the more traditional interpretation and is especially dominant in Portuguese academic circles.

Other scholars have put forward more nuanced views, which are more in line with the idea that a *pronunciamento* ultimately meant different things for different people at different times. For Fowler, there were times when people thought that a *pronunciamento* was not exactly a praetorian *coup*. Used to label the military mobilization of Rafael del Riego of 1 January 1820, the term *pronunciamiento* was generally adopted throughout Latin America, but not to name a strict military *coup*. In Mexico, in the aftermath of Iturbide’s Plan of Iguala, a *pronunciamiento* became instead a popular form to designate any sort of insurrectionary practice or forceful negotiation. Therefore, in this case, a *pronunciamento* was conceived as a protest or petition with a list of grievances or demands which, if not met, could result in armed rebellion or even a *coup d’état*. The insurrection may involve the armed forces, and indeed many troops, but it does not necessarily have to be led by them (Fowler, 2009, p.12). However, it should be noted that Fowler concedes that after the 1840s a *pronunciamiento* increasingly came to be more like a praetorian seize on power, also in Mexico (Fowler, 2016).

Our findings have shown how the concept of *pronunciamento* developed from referring to a speech act, to denoting political contestation and

9 In the original: “[É] uma intervenção de oficiais de carreira [...] que pretende substituir um governo ou um regime sem violência.” Valente (1997, p. 9).

revolutionary activity. Although equally censured in both Iberian countries, the word took very different paths in Spain and Portugal, in dictionaries and in political vocabulary, which probably explains the divergent historiographical approaches. This essay represents an innovative incursion into restricted source material, mainly dictionaries, and offers promising, although limited, results. Hopefully, these findings pave the way for further developments on a broader research front, which might aim to reconstitute and chart the historical dissemination of the word and its uses (and misuses) in several countries, in different chronological periods, and various sources.

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Miguel Dantas da Cruz » miguel.cruz@ics.ulisboa.pt » Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa » Av. Professor Aníbal de Bettencourt — 1600-189 Lisboa, Portugal » <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7466-3251>.
