

Mahogany Name Controversy

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An understanding of a phenomenon as complex as the controversy over the use and meaning of the word *mahogany* requires consideration of both intra-linguistic and extra-linguistic factors (3, p. 94). The contention has developed largely around the commercial use of the name, but has had other ramifications. In a recent commentary, Malone (10) makes a whimsical attempt to justify an untenable position taken earlier (9) that *mahogany* is a generic term in origin and usage. In both of the above citations Malone explains his linguistic facts without due regard to their descriptive and historical context.

Malone (10, p.286) is in error when he suggests that the Bahama Island term 'madeira' used for *mahogany* "is merely a translation of a native term *mahogany* and that this term meant simply 'wood.'" The natives of the Bahamas were Lucayans. They were of the Arawak tribe, as were the Indians of Cuba, Hispaniola, and Jamaica, and they spoke the same language (2). The Arawak name for the *mahogany* tree (*Swietenia* sp.) was *caoba* (*caoban*, *caobano*) on all these islands, including the Bahamas. The "native term *mahogany*" meaning simply wood cannot be substantiated, because the word *mahogany* did not exist in the native Lucayan language of the Bahama Islands. The further statement that "on the Bahama Islands mahogany was the wood *par excellence* and for that reason it would be natural enough for the natives to refer to it by means of a generic term" is likewise based on untenable linguistic evidence.

In primitive as well as in culturally advanced languages when an object with excellent or superior qualities is named, a distinct or specific name is adopted, not a generic term. The word diamond is not applied to just any hard shiny rock, nor is

the name mahogany used for just any big tree or reddish wood, as Malone would have us believe.

The excellence of mahogany (*Swietenia* spp.) was soon observed by the Spaniards in colonial times, as a result of use in both naval and civil construction. Oviedo (13, p. 89) was the first to state this specifically when he wrote in 1535, "Mahogany (= coaban = *Swietenia*) is one of the biggest and best trees and has the best wood . . . among those found on the island of Hispaniola. . . . In all parts of the world this wood would be esteemed. . . ."

It did not take the British long to perceive the excellence of mahogany as they became active in the Caribbean area. They became acquainted with it both through their contact with the Spaniards and from their own observations. As a result, a very active trade with England in mahogany lumber developed, beginning before 1700. According to Swabey (16), "during the early period of the British occupation of Jamaica from 1665 on, considerable quantities of mahogany, *S. mahagoni*, were exported." London import statistics filed at the Public Records Office first mention mahogany (mohogony) for the period 1699-1700. An advertisement of a mahogany (mohogony) sale was published in the *London Gazette* on February 22, 1702. The period from 1725 to 1825 is spoken of as the golden age of mahogany in England (14). During the later 18th and 19th Centuries mahogany had a dominant place in the London and Liverpool hardwood lumber markets (7).

Among English and American lumber merchants, ship builders, furniture manufacturers and dealers, architects and antique furniture dealers, the wood mahogany (*Swietenia* spp.) has been, since as early as 1700, and still is regarded as a standard of excellence, as has been amply pointed out (5, 15).

"West Indies mahogany, used throughout the West Indies for construction, furniture,

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interior trim, from Spanish colonial times to the present has a better service record in the Caribbean area for resistance to destructive agencies than any other wood or construction material" (17).

Catesby (1) and Jacquin (4, p.41) established beyond question the relationship between the tree species and the wood. *The Kew Bulletin of Miscellaneous Information* for 1937 mentions that the question has been raised as to the exact significance of the words "true" and "false" used to modify the word mahogany. "True *mahogany* is restricted to the species of *Swietenia* on botanical and historical grounds. It is evident that in 1850 both to botanists and to lumber merchants the name mahogany meant the wood of a species of *Swietenia*."

The public understanding of the meaning of the word mahogany has followed that of the users of this wood since they introduced it to the public. If it had ever been used as a generic term, either linguistically or historically, mahogany would never have become a term denoting a standard of excellence in the markets for fine hardwoods.

The meaning of the term mahogany is established by usage, as pointed out by Malone, although he ignores or misinterprets the bulk of the evidence. He states that 70% of his 1,500 quotations of current usage of the name mahogany were without a qualifying adjective. Learned (8), in his critique of Malone's first article on mahogany (9), says, "Any extension of the name mahogany to substitutes or imitations should, in honest practice, include some descriptive word or phrase as a *caveat emptor*."

Mell (11), 20 years before he became involved in the legal aspects of the name controversy, stated, "True mahogany . . . stands in a class by itself and all other woods palmed off on the public as such are substitutes. . . . The deliberate substitution of various woods for mahogany is no less a fraud. . . ." Therefore, an honest interpretation of 70% of Malone's 1,500 quotations, if he has described them correctly, can refer only to the standard of excellence, mahogany of *Swietenia* spp. The few remaining scattered references to mahogany presented as being other than *Swietenia* cannot rule in this case. These are peripheral phenomena. As Malone himself states, our language is

democratic—the majority rules. Thus, Malone's (10) interpretation of his data and his statement that "In sum, there can be little doubt that mahogany was a generic term in origin and no doubt at all that it has been a generic term throughout its recorded history in the English language" are a complete misinterpretation of the facts. Learned (8), in commenting on Malone's definition of mahogany (9) says, ". . . we have here no definition at all, to say nothing of a 'generic' use that is to be defined. . . ."

Malone (9, pp.313, 317), basing his biased position on a false premise taken from Mell's "Biography of the Word Mahogany" (12), tries to present evidence to justify his position, an endeavor which is singularly unsuccessful. As Learned (8) says, ". . . dictionary . . . may with justification overlook confusion common in ignorant usage, as well as the morals of merchandising. . . ." But Malone as a linguist will find it hard to justify taking this position. He becomes, perhaps unwittingly, a victim, as did Mell, of the blatant and concentrated effort to subvert the name mahogany for commercial advantage.

ECONOMIC BOTANY records that Malone's "Notes on the Word Mahogany" was received for publication on March 23, 1964. However, an almost identical version under the same title and authorship was presented four months earlier on November 5, 1963, in mimeographed form by the president of the Philippine Mahogany Association, at public hearings of the House Committee on Foreign and Domestic Commerce on Mahogany Bill H.R. 6210 in Washington, D.C. This raises the point whether linguistic or commercial considerations had a priority in the preparation of this material.

Malone (10), in trying to cast doubt on the origin of the word mahogany in the Yoruba word 'ogonwo' and the connotations of meaning presented by Lamb (6), falls prey to what Greenberg (3) refers to as "ad hoc generalizations, often tautological, adduced to explain some specific linguistic fact without regard to . . . descriptive and historical context."

To bring rational logic to the notorious mahogany name controversy at this late date requires an unbiased analysis of the facts surrounding the origin, history and present

use of the word. Malone with his apparent fixation on trying to establish generic use of specific wood names obviously is not qualified to undertake such a task.

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