



# ***BIRRO*: TRACKING DOWN THE ORIGINS OF AN ORNITHONYM**

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Carles Martín – Universitat de  
Barcelona

# INTRODUCTION: THE CATALAN OF NOVA TABARCA

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- Nova Tabarca is a small island off the coast of Alicante, Spain.
  - Also called “l’Illa Plana” (Flat Island) due to its low elevation (max. 15m ASL)
  - It is currently home to less than 60 people.
  - First permanent inhabitants in ~1763, forming a Genoese/Ligurian-speaking community.
- ↓
- After two centuries of continued contact, Genoese is completely replaced by Valencian (Alicante variety).





# THE TABARQUÍ'S (VERY SMALL) LEXICAL TREASURE



- A handful of words present in the island's variety are not found anywhere else in the Catalan linguistic dominium.
- These words, which trace their roots back to Genoese, refer mainly to marine (or closely related) fauna:
  - *faula* 'crab', *asi* 'sea urchin', *polpassa* 'large octopus', *bavalosa* 'slug', *bastardo* 'false fish'
  - Whereas general valencian *cranc*, *bogamari*, *polp*, *bavosa*.
- With the exception of *birro* 'Common swift'. (in general valencian *falzia*)

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Genoese Ligurian		Tabarquí Valencian	General Valencian
sbiru	➔	birro	falzia
zin	➔	asín	bogamarina/eriçó
fòulu/fàulu	➔	faula	cranc(a)
bavaruza	➔	bavalosa	bavosa
bastardu	➔	bastardo	?

unclear

So,

**WHY ARE ALL THESE WORDS ICHTHYONYMS,  
EXCEPT FOR *BIRRO*?**

**WHY IS THE TERM FOR THE COMMON SWIFT  
THE ONLY REMAINING GENOESE ORNITHONYM?  
(WHY SWIFTS, AND NOT ANY OTHER BIRD SPECIES  
FOUND ON THE ISLAND?)**



Cala/Cova dels Birros





# COINCIDENCES AROUND THE WEST MEDITERRANEAN



- Menton: *sbirrou*
- Corsica: *sbiru, spiru, sbiriolu, sbirachjò, sbirulu banditu / barbarottulu* (Cuttoli-Corticchiato)
- North Sardinia:
  - Logudorese Sardinian: *imbìrriu, isbìrriu, antzibirri, cuntzibirri / babbarottu*.
  - Sassarese: *isbirriu, birru / pabbarottu, babbarottu*.
  - Gallurese: *(i)sbìrriu, sbirru / babbarottu*.

No other ornithonyms of Genoese origin have been found in the languages of these areas, despite manifesting a strong influence in many sectors.





# ABOUT THE ADAPTATION OF THE TERM

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Yet another mystery

All languages tend to follow a set of “rules” when adapting a loanword, even if it’s just a one-time pronunciation, in order for it to match the language’s phonological and (sometimes) morphological system.

/tri'este/



/tɹi'esteɪ/

(/tɹi'est/)



Lig. /'sbiru/

*Noun, masc.* 'A bird of the family Apodidae'

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*Noun, masc.* ‘A bird of the family Apodidae’

### △ Masculine singular morph /-u/

↳ Adaptation to val. /-∅/ or sp. /-o/

Lig. /'skaru/ → Val. /es'kar/ ‘to bait (a hook)’

Lig. /tʃanu/ → Val. /tʃano/ ‘slowly, softly’

### △ Word-initial /s/ followed by consonant

↳ Insertion of epenthetic /e/ (∅ → [e] \ #\_\_ /s/+C)

Eng. /'spɔ:t/ → Val. /es'pɔrt/; It. /spa'getti/ → Val. /espa'yeti/

It. /'sbiro/ → Val. /es'biro/ ‘bailiff’



Lig. /'sbiru/ > Val. \* /es'biro/

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This would be the expectable adapted word, based on the typical process.  
so where does the form /'biro/ come from?

Understanding the referents' (swifts) habits, and therefore the speakers' perception of them, can help us solve this etymological problem.

Val. \* /es'biro/

*Noun, masc.* 'A bird of the family Apodidae'

A fairly common linguistic process in Catalan is that of **resegmentation**: a process through which the speaker may wrongly interpret how a word or phrase is subdivided, resulting in the formation of new words.

/ 'nɔw/ 'walnut' > /la + 'nɔw/ 'the walnut' (la nou / l'anou') > /a' nɔw/ 'walnut'  
/la' nɔw/

/ 'ran/ 'next to' > /a + 'ran/ '(right) next to' > /a' ran/ > 'next to'

Val. \* /es 'biro/

*Noun, masc.* ‘A bird of the family Apodidae’

Due to them being usually seen in flocks by the speakers, swifts are commonly referred to in plural (lig. *i sbirri*; general val. *les falcies* or *les falzies*). This is corroborated by the fact that most phrasemes (idioms and other types of multi-word lexical units) referencing swifts or similar birds refer to them collectively, rather than individually.

Additionally, the plural article in the *tabarquí* variety of Valencian is /es/, for both masculine and feminine.

/es 'ɔme(n)s/ ‘the men’; /es 'dɔnes/ ‘the women’

“\*” means this is a hypothetical, reconstructed term, and not an actually documented one.



\* /es'biro/  
Val.

*Noun, masc.* 'A bird of the family Apodidae'

If we take these two factors into consideration, a new explanation appears:

/es'biro/ 'swift' > /es'biro + s/ 'swifts'

> resegmentation as /es + 'biro + s/ > /'biro + s/ > /'biro/

Val. /'biro/

Val. /'biro/

*Noun, masc.* ‘A bird of the family Apodidae’

The previously mentioned toponym (Swift Cove) may have helped to carry out this process, as “Cova d’esbirros” is pronounced the exact same as “Cova dels birros”: [ˌkɔvəðez'biros].



# CONCLUSIONS

- Linguistics  Ornithology

“Sbirru di mari” →



?!

- More regard for one another
- Bigger, still unsolved lexicological/etymological problems






# THANK YOU

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 Carles Martín

 [carlosmartincabello@gmail.com](mailto:carlosmartincabello@gmail.com)

# CONCLUSIONS

- While this may seem like a very specific research topic (which it is), it serves as an example of how linguistics and ornithology should not disregard each other in order to be able to solve the problems they encounter.
- Very frequently we encounter lexicological analyses that forget to take into account the nature of the referents that the words refer to, and especially in the biology sector.
- This small case could be therefore extrapolated to bigger, still unsolved etymological problems, or just general lexicological documentations.



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# ABOUT THE ADAPTATION OF THE TERM

- All languages tend to follow a set of “rules” when adapting a loanword, even if it’s just a one-time pronunciation, in order for it to meet the language’s phonological and (sometimes) morphological system.
  - Spanish [ˈkɛsɔ] becomes [ˈkɛɪsɔʊ] when pronounced in US English, since syllable final –e and –o are not accepted.
  - Same thing with Alicante [aliˈkaɲtɛ] > [aləˈkanteɪ] (US)  
> [æliˈkænt] (UK)
  - The word “sbirru” [ˈzbiru] contains two elements that do not meet the linguistic system of the Valencian variety of Catalan:
    - Masculine singular morph [-u] (whereas typically cat. [-Ø], sp. [-o])
    - Word-initial group /s/+C
- Eng. *stop* > cat. *estop*; eng. *sport* > cat. *esport*  
it. *sbirro* > cat. *esbirro*