

Bilingual Spanish/English Glossary of Migration-Related Terms from the South Texas-Northeast Mexico Border Region

The following terms in Spanish and English may be unfamiliar to many readers of the stories posted on this website. Please send feedback, including suggestions of other terms to add, to dspener@trinity.edu.

Agarrada Used by migrants to refer to an arrest/apprehension by the U.S. Border Patrol.

Bodies Used by Border Patrol agents to indicate how many people they have apprehended on a given day or are holding in detention in a given place, as in *How many bodies did we get today?*

Bracero A Mexican agricultural laborer that has come to work in the United States, whether under legal contract or as an undocumented immigrant. Derives from the Spanish word *brazo*, meaning “arm” in English.

Bracero Program A series of annual agreements between the Mexican and U.S. governments that permitted U.S. farmers to hire migrant Mexican laborers on a legally-contracted basis. The program began in 1942 to help U.S. farmers meet labor shortages brought about by U.S. involvement in the Second World War. It was ended unilaterally by the United States in 1964. U.S. farmers issued between four and five million temporary work contracts to Mexican men during the life of the program.

Brinco Literally “hop” or “skip.” Used by migrants and coyotes to refer to that leg of the migration journey that consists of crossing the Río Bravo del Norte/Rio Grande from Mexico into Texas, as in *El patero se dedica nada más al brinco del río* [The patero’s job is limited to crossing the river].

Coyotaje The services provided by a coyote. Pronounced *koh-yo-TAH-hey*. For a more extensive discussion of the use of this term by Mexicans, see Chapter 3 of *Clandestine Crossings*, “Coyotaje as a Cultural Practice Applied to Migration,” as well as the author’s 2009 conference paper titled “Some Reflections on the Language of Clandestine Migration on the Mexico-U.S. Border.”

Coyote A person hired by undocumented migrants to help them enter the United States or by a U.S. employer to procure migrant labor. For a more extensive discussion of the use of this term by Mexicans, see Chapter 3 of *Clandestine Crossings*, “Coyotaje as a Cultural Practice Applied to Migration,” as well as the 2009 conference paper titled “Some Reflections on the Language of Clandestine Migration on the Mexico-U.S. Border.”

EWI Acronym used by U.S. Border Patrol agents to refer to migrants that have “entered without inspection,” i.e., that have entered the United States without presenting proper documentation to an immigration inspector at a legal port of entry. Pronounced *EE-whee*.

El otro lado “The other side,” a term used by migrants in Mexico to refer to the United States, as in *Pienso ir al otro lado*.

Federales Mexican federal police.

Garita Immigration/customs inspection station. *La primera garita* [the first inspection station] is at the legal port of entry on the international bridges connecting Texas with Mexico. *La segunda garita* [the second inspection station] is the immigration checkpoint located along all the major thoroughfares in South Texas that lead away from the Mexican border. Migrants talk about having to get through/around the *garitas* on their way to live and work in the U.S. interior.

Grupo Beta The Mexican government's migrant-protection unit that patrols the Mexican side of the border. Not a police or paramilitary force, it's role is primarily to advise migrants of the dangers of clandestine border-crossing and aid them when they are in distress.

harboring and transporting U.S. law makes it illegal for anyone to knowingly "harbor" and/or "transport" a person that is not legally-authorized to be present in U.S. territory.

ICE Acronym for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the unit of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security that carries out enforcement activities, such as workplace raids, away from the border in the interior of the country. Pronounced "ice."

Indocumentada/o An undocumented migrant.

Inmigración Literally, "immigration," a term used colloquially by migrants to refer to the U.S. Border Patrol.

Judiciales The Mexican Judicial Police.

K-9, K-9 unit Refers to the trained dogs deployed at immigration checkpoints to detect narcotics and persons concealed in vehicles.

Lower Rio Grande Valley This term usually refers to the region of South Texas downstream from the Falcon Reservoir, but people sometimes use it to refer to the region extending as far upstream as Laredo.

migra, La Short for *migración*, this colloquialism used by Mexican migrants to refer to the U.S. Border Patrol.

Migración Literally, "migration," this colloquialism is also used by Mexican migrants to refer to the U.S. Border Patrol.

Mojada/o An undocumented migrant. Literally, "wet," this colloquialism is often translated to English as "wetback." Although "wetback" in English is always pejorative, **mojada/o** is not necessarily intended by Mexican Spanish speakers to be denigrating, especially when the speaker is her or himself undocumented.

Mojarra A small fish, *Cichlasoma cyanoguttatum*, "mojarra del norte," that swims the international boundary between Northeast Mexico and South Texas and whose maritime cousins are heavily fished for food elsewhere in Mexico. In a play on words, *mojarra* is used synonymously with *mojada/o* to refer to undocumented migrants.

Monte The dense brush that covers much of the South Texas landscape.

Municipales Local police forces in Mexico, in contradistinction to **federales** and **judiciales**.

Nopal The prickly-pear cactus that grows abundantly in the South Texas Brush Country.

OTM This acronym is used by U.S. Border Patrol agents to refer to the "other than Mexican" migrants they arrest. Pronounced *oh-tee-em*.

Paisano In Mexican Spanish, this term can refer to “fellow Mexicans” or “fellow townspeople.”

Papalote A windmill that pumps water out of an underground aquifer. In South Texas, a *papalote* is usually attached to a cattle trough or pond. Migrants and coyotes rely on papalotes to replenish their water as they trek through the brush.

Paterismo The occupation of or the services provided by a *patero*.

Patero Literally, an oarsmen aboard a shallow-draft boat known as a *pato*. In Tamaulipas, *patero* refers to men who illegally take people and/or contraband back and forth across the Río Bravo. It is sometimes used as a synonym for *coyote* or *pollero*. For a more extensive discussion of the use of this term by Mexicans, see the author’s 2009 conference paper titled “Some Reflections on the Language of Clandestine Migration on the Mexico-U.S. Border.”

Pato While this usually means “duck” in English, in Tamaulipas a *pato* is a small, shallow-draft boat propelled by paddles or oars. For a more extensive discussion of the use of this term by Mexicans, see the author’s 2009 conference paper titled “Some Reflections on the Language of Clandestine Migration on the Mexico-U.S. Border.”

Perrera Literally, “dog pound” or “dog kennel,” this term is used by Mexican migrants to refer to U.S. Border Patrol vans used to transport apprehended migrants to immigration detention centers. Roughly equivalent to “paddy wagon” in colloquial English.

Pollero A paid guide and/or transporter of migrants. Often used synonymously with *coyote*. For a more extensive discussion of the use of this term by Mexicans, see the author’s 2009 conference paper titled “Some Reflections on the Language of Clandestine Migration on the Mexico-U.S. Border.”

Pollo Slang term used by coyotes/polleros to refer to the migrants that they guide and transport across the border.

port of entry The immigration and customs checkpoints along the border through which one may legally enter the United States.

primera garita See *garita*.

Rancho In Mexican Spanish, this term refers to a small, impoverished rural settlement. It is not the same as a “ranch,” as understood in American English.

ranchera/o The inhabitant of a *rancho* in Mexico.

Redada An immigration raid.

Río Bravo del Norte Mexicans use this name for what people in the United States call the Rio Grande.

Río Grande Valley Usually used interchangeably with *Lower Rio Grande Valley*.

Segunda garita See *garita*.

VR, VR'ed Acronym used by U.S. Border Patrol agents for “voluntary return.” It refers to Mexican migrants “voluntarily” waiving their right to a hearing in U.S. immigration court and agreeing to return to Mexico without being formally deported. It is in migrants’ interest to waive this right in order to avoid lengthy detention while awaiting a hearing in immigration court. Since the 1920s, the vast majority of Mexicans apprehended by the Border Patrol have been *VR'ed* to their country using this bureaucratic procedure.

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