

Words of the sea: the presence of the ocean in Portuguese proverbial speech in an historical perspective

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Words of the sea in the portuguese early modern period

The sea and its inhabitants have been a common theme in Portuguese proverbial speech, many of which have survived into current vocabulary. In many cases, we find the same proverbs in sources dating back to the 16th, 17th centuries. This survival is evidence of the power of the sea and its imagery in the way people perceive and understand the world, as well as its central importance in Portuguese culture.

Often coopted by a romantic, nationalistic view, as the means by which a “Golden Age” was achieved, cultural perceptions of the sea in historiographical debates have been insufficient in properly identifying the diverse relations between humans and the sea. As is often the case when dealing with History, our scope tends to be skewed to the “top”, leaving out the silent masses.

It is in this context that we suggest the focus on oral tradition, in particular proverbial speech, as a proxy to these forgotten voices through the centuries- “the wit of one and the wisdom of many” (Mieder, 2014).

Proverbs in the sources and in word of mouth

We managed to come to a total of 72 proverbs. As expected when dealing with oral tradition some repetition occurred. This is not only explained by the fact that proverbs flow through time through oral speak, but also due to later authors (notably in our case, Bluteau) building upon the research of his predecessors and quoting them as sources of information.

Taking some examples, we can build timelines of the presence of these proverbs through the centuries, showcasing their staying power, in oral and written records. Let us focus in this instance on the proverb: “Se queres aprender a orar, entra no mar”/“If you want to learn how to pray, enter the sea”.



This saying, which alludes to a sense of fearful respect towards the sea, as well as of the need for divine protection when partaking in seafaring activities (Chacoto, 2022), can be found all throughout our built timeline. It is still living today in the word of mouth of fishermen and families. Moreover, it has retained its linguistic cohesion indicating its relevance and cultural value across the time and regions in Portugal.

The sea remains a distinct part of Portuguese identity and as such it is quite often invoked when it comes to proverbial speech. Yet we are not able to infer one distinct and monolithic “meaning of the sea” from the body of sayings that we gathered. The sea can be a place of fear (“Quem se nã quer auenturar: não passe o mar”/“If you don’t want adventure: don’t cross the sea”), of contemplating beauty (“Pera ter a vista bella, olha o mar, & mora na terra”/“To have a pretty sight, look at the sea and live in land”). The words of the sea work as metaphors for daily life, advising temperance (“Nem tanto ao mar, nem tanto à terra”/“Not too much in the sea or inland”), among other things. By sparking debate in this subject, we encourage historians and other scholars to rethink the cultural and symbolic meanings of the words that we not only use on a daily basis, but have long informed human perceptions of our blue world.

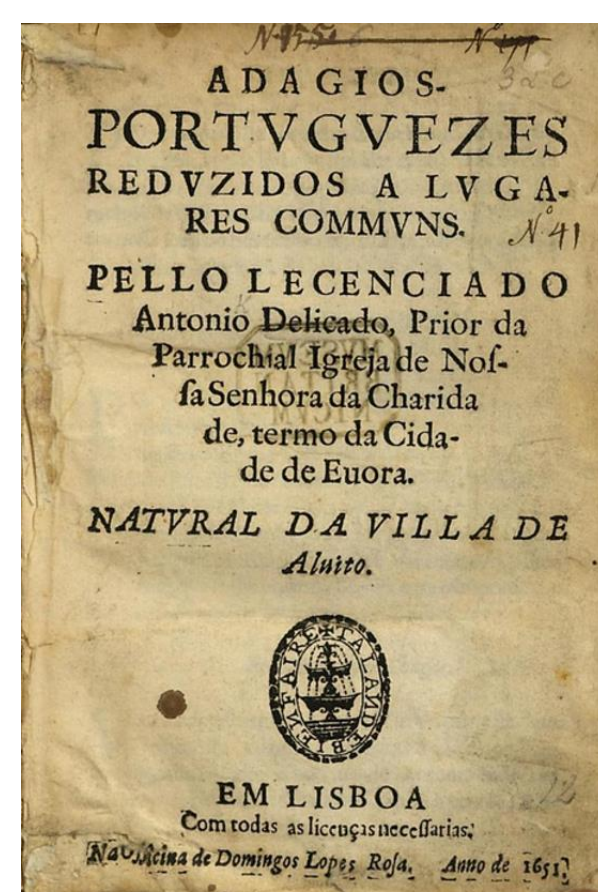
References

1) Bluteau, R. (1712-1721), Vocabulario Portuguez e Latino, Coimbra. 2) Chacoto, L. (2022). “Reflexão sobre a paremiografia a propósito dos provérbios do mar”. Mato Grosso do Sul. 3) Delicado, A. (1651), Adagios portvgvezes redvzidos a lvgares communs..., Lisboa. 4) Machado, J., P. (2005). O Grande Livro dos Provérbios. Lisboa. 5) Mieder, W. (2014). Behold the proverbs of a people: proverbial wisdom in culture, literature, and politics, Mississippi. 6) Pereira, B. (1655). *Florilegio dos modos de fallar...*, Lisboa.

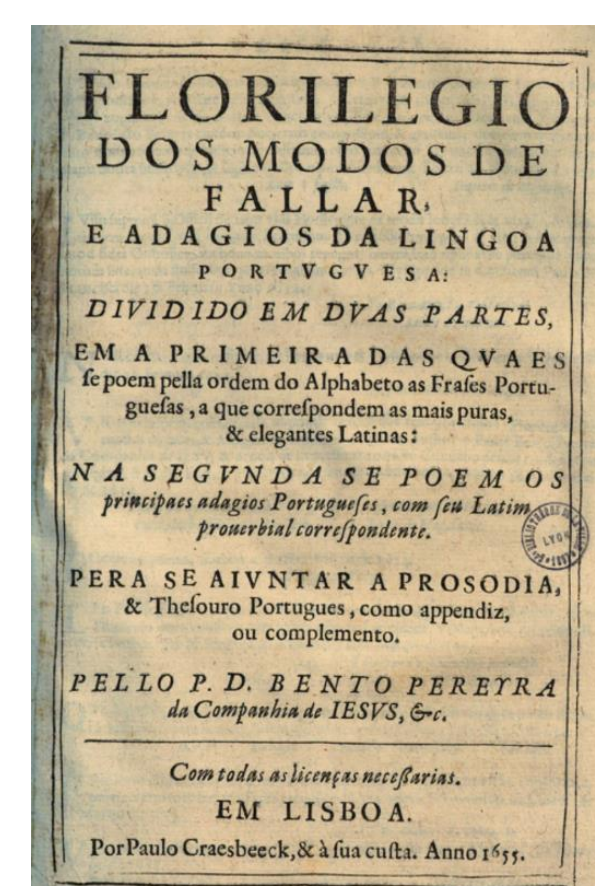
Our approach

We selected three different modern portuguese proverbial sources: António Delicado’s, *Adagios portvgvezes redvzidos a lvgares communs* (1651); Bento Pereira’s, *Florilegio dos modos de fallar* (1655) and Raphael Bluteau’s, *Vocabulario Portuguez e Latino* (1712-1721).

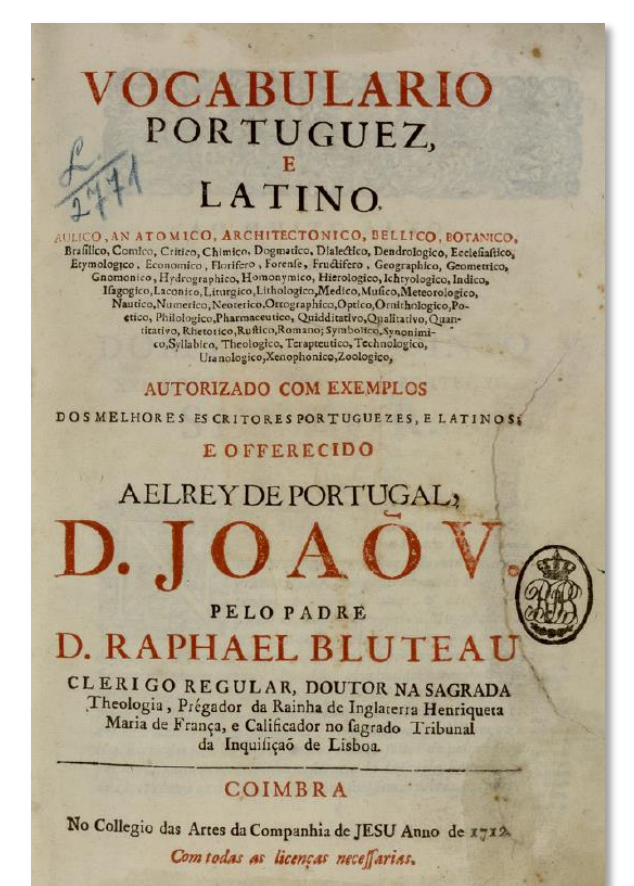
As Bluteau’s work is primarily a dictionary, comprising of 8 large volumes (plus two add-ons), we opted to search for keyword entries to see if there were proverbs attached to the entry. In addition to the primary focus on these sources, we took a look at José Pedro Machado’s, *O Grande Livro dos Provérbios* (2005), as a contemporary point of comparison, seeing what proverbs survived until modern compilations.



DELICADO, António, *Adagios portvgvezes redvzidos a lvgares communs...*, Lisboa, 1651.



PEREIRA, Bento, *Florilegio dos modos de fallar...*, Lisboa, 1655.



BLUTEAU, Raphael, *Vocabulario Portuguez e Latino*, Coimbra, 1712-1721.



Ex-votos are typically paintings, objects or their representations that constitute religious offerings in order to thank for the safety of mariners and fishermen. They are yet another way of coastal peoples to relate to the sea and are found in different time periods in Portugal and elsewhere.