

Pillaged Books and Plundered Maps: Pirates and the Boundaries of Language

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When the king asked him what he was thinking of, that he should molest the sea, he said with defiant independence: ‘The same as you when you molest the world! Since I do this with a little ship I am called a pirate. You do it with a great fleet and are called an emperor.’ (St. Augustine’s *City of God* (1963), cf. Baer (1982, 19–20)).

Societies sometime proceed through the punishment of small thefts, and the institutionalization of larger ones.¹ The same might be said of research. Pirates can be writers, and writers can be pirates. Academics teach students not to plagiarize, or steal others’ words, but citations themselves, and scholarly writing more broadly, can be viewed as a type of regulated robbery. Citations acknowledge another’s contribution, while giving the author permission to take and reuse it. Authors are also the subjects of piracy, since the term *piracy* also refers to the downloading of copyrighted documents, books, videos and music, either through peer-to-peer torrent software or directly from websites like Aaaaarg.fail, whose name references stereotyped piratical dialects.² Not coincidentally, in Europe earlier definitions of intellectual piracy were connected to mercantilist laws that excommunicated pirates from the national community (Temple 2000).³

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Academic piracy isn’t limited to the internet. Entire fields have suffered from allegations of theft. Archaeology originated in conquest, as artefacts from around the world were forcibly unearthed or bought on the black market before being shipped to the urban centers of the world’s imperial powers. Underwater archaeology in particular has been singled out as a form of preservation that, some claim, is a veiled type of looting. Many of the maps used by pirates have disappeared, but maps of the wrecks of pirate ships are particularly valuable as a result of the ongoing obsession with the romantic myth of Caribbean piracy.⁴

In light of these entwined histories of piracy and authorship, this article analyzes the documentary histories of Caribbean pirates to argue for greater attention to the material boundaries of language. To understand the entanglements between texts and the world, I focus specifically on the boundaries between language and non-language--between objects that are considered linguistic and those that are not--in sources for the pirate Benito de Soto and related examples. Accounts of Caribbean pirates are very widely read, and a wealth of sources is available for the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Pirates have been hugely influential on a popular level, and the theft of documents is a recurring theme in many of the relevant texts. The study of such thefts provides insights into the materialities of writing and research, while drawing attention to how definitions of theft, and related notions of value, can change depending on their contexts.

As the historical reporting of the destruction of texts, pirate textualities provide an interesting case for the application and further expansion of sociolinguistic theory, which has explored the varied ways that language is used in specific instances and communities (Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998). In recent years, linguistic anthropologists, drawing on the work of Michael Silverstein, have elaborated on the concepts of *metapragmatic discourse* (discourse about the practical role and purpose of language) and the related *linguistic ideologies* (broader ideologies about the

practical role and function of language) that such discourse both draws upon and reveals (Lee 1997; Lucy 1993; Silverstein 2004; 1993; 1976; Silverstein and Urban 1996). The literature thereby builds upon J.L. Austin's (2000) work on linguistic acts, in which he studies the ways that saying something may constitute an act, as in the 'I pronounce you guilty,' of a courtroom trial. As such, they have suggested a set of frameworks for analyzing the complex relationships between a diverse range of semiotic phenomena and their broader social and material contexts. These include the related study of *indexicality*, or the ways that statements such as, 'Look over there!' can be said to point to or index a relationship with its context, including the material world (Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998).⁵ However, in order to reap the full benefits of metapragmatic theory, it is necessary to also understand its scope and the limits of this notion of the Meta, and this is precisely one goal of this article.⁶

Concerns about textuality have shaped the disciplines of both linguistics and social history from early on, and this has been further developed in the Subaltern Studies literature (e.g. Chatterjee 2002; Chaturvedi 2000; Pandey 2000). But often the emphasis has been on how little the existing historical sources focus upon the majority of people in the world, such as oppressed groups, even in cases where they are named or otherwise indicated in a particular text (Spivak 1984; 1988). This also holds true for work in pirate studies as social history, which in many cases has striven to overcome the absence of direct accounts of pirates' and sailors' lives through a detailed exploration of those resources that do exist in light of a deep knowledge of the broader contexts in which the sources were produced (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000; Rediker 2004; 1989). However, both social history and subaltern studies have concentrated upon strategies for dealing with reading official sources against the grain, in cases where there is an absence of direct sources, such as with documents detailing sailors' daily lives. They focus less on subject areas, such as Caribbean

pirates, where an overwhelming abundance of popular sources exist, but whose main characters remain marginalized.⁷

Certainly, the wealth of sources available for Caribbean pirates demonstrates that they have loomed large in past public imaginations as well as present ones. Yet this also means that the content of the sources diverges widely from the varied and complex factual accounts preferred by many historians. Instead, the primary sources that deal with such pirates during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries tend to revolve around a few distinct, if loosely organized, genres, including legal documents and popular tracts, both of which include the testimony of pirates as well as victims, combined with folklore, travel journals and nautical charts, and reporting of pirates' speeches in public--generally directly before they were executed. Thus, although there are a proliferation of available pirate biographies, as well as indexes of pirate biographies, and even indexes of indexes,⁸ the abundance of sources is evidence of the simultaneous aversion from, and admiration of, Atlantic pirates that have shaped studies of them from the beginning.⁹ And such historical fascination, as well as piracy's status as a crime, means that documents played as important a role in the original conduct and definition of Atlantic piracy as they do in determining its legacy.

Since many of the texts were written for popular consumption by people in Europe and the European colonies of the time, it is to be expected that the authors seek to justify their accounts both as texts and as more than simple lurid accounts. Indeed, authors were concerned to show that pirates were worthy of the written word, and to demonstrate that their own writings were more authoritative than simple gossip. So overall the sources themselves tend to argue for the primacy of the written word both in legal and academic terms. What is surprising, then, is the very ambiguity of many accounts of these pirates' relationship to texts in many documents. In the documents pirates are sometimes presented as the antithesis of society, and its textual bent, in their wanton destruction of official papers. Yet this is not the only depiction of pirates, who are also shown treasuring those same papers and the material value

they represent. What emerges, both within and between different accounts and different pirates, are practices where texts are not necessarily anything special, where language is not necessarily separated from other spheres of activity.

Therefore, it is not the wholesale otherness or incommensurability (Kuhn 1996; Povinelli 2001) of the actions described that is of crucial theoretical interest here, but rather the very ambivalence about texts and textuality. Similarly, I do not aim to tease out an overarching empirical history of piracy from the documents that name and define them. Instead, I focus upon the role of the documents in select, emblematic cases from the historical accounts of Caribbean piracy--usually in the course of being destroyed, forgotten, misused or otherwise left in states of disarray.¹⁰ I chose the accounts of de Soto because they display the full range of treatment of documents from the sources for Caribbean piracy more broadly, and I supplement his account with accounts of the more famous pirates who came before and after him. The documents for piracy are of crucial interest to a better understanding of the equally complex boundaries of textuality in contemporary theory. Although pirates' motives are often unintelligible from the sources, those sources are not reducible to the prejudices of their authors. Something more is going on, and this paper attempts to delineate its specifics.

Indeed, this 'something more' both exemplifies and reveals the challenge of attributing pirate accounts to, alternately, a fabricated or exaggerated story or the actions of a pirate 'out there', allegedly beyond the text. Instead, I show how, due to the materiality of language and documents, the story and the empirical history are each implicated in the other in ways that do not allow for them to be extricated from each other. The quote that opens this article comes from a much older era of piracy and literacy in the Mediterranean. It can be seen as an inversion upon the legitimation of power through redefinition. It serves equally well as a commentary upon the ways that, as we will see, differing conceptions of language might serve as

the medium for using the 'same' texts and discourses in radically different ways, even to the point of outlining the limits of textuality itself.

Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000; See also Rediker 2004; 1989) have argued that historical piracy developed in part as a response to the underpaid labor of slaves, sailors, and others, all of whom helped to build maritime empires that were made rich in no small part through conquest and predation. This provides an interesting perspective upon the ways that scholarly critique, as the incorporation and re-use of documents, has been formed in an ongoing, if generally unacknowledged, relation to piracy. For allegations of 'theft', through the use of pirated versions of scholarly texts, are cast in a different light depending upon the scale of the theft in question—for example, whether the unpaid and underpaid labor that sustains academic inquiry is included in the definition of *theft*. In addition, it's not unheard of to assign the name of 'theft' to the kind of re-reading of archival sources that I will conduct throughout this article, the searching against the grain--a quest that is purposefully off-kilter. I do so in order to analyze some of the ways that texts and textuality are privileged in scholarly thought, and how this affects the form and content of research. For as definitions of theft vary, they do so in intimate relation to conceptions of language, including ideas about what language is, what it does, and what is done to it, in the world.

Adios, Todos! The Death of de Soto

According to one account, Benito de Soto appeared penitent at his execution: 'On his arrival at the fatal spot...on the verge of the bay, he spent a quarter of an hour in fervent prayer, the rain falling heavily all the time' (London 1830, 35). The narrator, A. B. London, who claims to have been an eyewitness to the event, declares that de Soto held a crucifix until a few moments before his death, and that he kissed it regularly and remorsefully 'with apparent devotion' (1830, 35). However, in Philip

Gosse's *The Pirate's Who's Who*, one of the most widely-read indexes of pirate biographies, Gosse tells us that de Soto 'died bravely', defiantly and without remorse (1968, 284). Moreover, Gosse makes no mention of religion. The two authors agree that de Soto stepped up on his own coffin, placed the noose around his neck, then jumped off, deliberately hanging himself. But London asserts that de Soto did this in order to 'assist the executioner in performing his awful duty' and that he 'passed into eternity without the slightest struggle!' (1830, 35). In contrast, Gosse suggests that de Soto wished to take his own life in one final act of defiance (1968, 284). London notes that de Soto's last speech in Gibraltar was one of caution, in which he 'harangued the surrounding populace in Spanish, acknowledging the justice of his sentence, and exhorting them to take warning by his death and to pray for him' (1830, 35). Gosse, on the other hand, writing one hundred years later, claims that de Soto's final statement, this time in Cadiz, consisted of nothing more than a resounding, '*Adios, todos!*' (Goodbye, everyone!) (1968, 284).

De Soto certainly was a notorious pirate by the time of his death at age twenty-six.¹¹ His was not a romantic sort of fame either, but one of excessive, if fallible, cruelty. I single him out because the conflicting stories told of de Soto's final speech illustrate quite vividly the potential that pirate studies holds for the understanding of the material role of text and language in both scholarly and everyday life. This potential is particularly notable in terms of the implications of using text, strictly defined, to relate semiotic activity that was originally neither written nor even strictly linguistic.¹² For example: after the hanging the authorities reportedly made sure that de Soto's sentence--which, like those of seven of his companions, included dragging and quartering--was properly carried out. They drove a stake into the beach, and impaled his head on it (London 1830, 29-30).

The accounts of de Soto's execution reveal the indeterminacy that arises when trying to discern to what extent his death could be read as a symbolic act, an attempt to 'speak' through his actions. Furthermore, even if his death were symbolic, then it is

entirely unclear who, if anyone, was speaking: de Soto, the chronicler who wrote the story down, or both? Due to these complexities, the extant documents for de Soto's acts of piracy allow for a better understanding of the relationship of reported speech and practices of documentation, and thus of the boundaries of language. Any attempt to determine to what extent a document might reveal an instance of speech is intimately tied up with the varied boundaries and conceptions of text and language themselves, of acts that are considered linguistic and those that are not.

Many of the archival sources that demonstrate pirates' disdain for documents were intended to provoke feelings of horror in the reading public, but I seek to show that they are not reducible to the prejudices of the scribe. Pirates do potentially reveal themselves through the sources, if only ambiguously, by troubling the expected accounts, by alternately subverting and reinforcing dominant notions of language and textuality. In the ensuing sections, I analyze two ways that these select sources depict pirates treating texts. First, pirates are presented as showing disdain for documents, both by destroying documents, in the sense of shredding or defacing them, or by forgoing the need for documents completely, as with required permits such as the Letters of Marque that gave permission for the plundering of enemy ships. Second, pirates are recorded as ignoring the linguistic aspects of documents, or at least showing only cursory regard to documents' linguistic content. They did so even when preserving documents, either manipulating them without destroying them--concealing and secreting them away, changing their shape somehow--or by manipulating others in order to change the contents of future texts--often in order to avoid incriminating themselves.

Throughout, I explore the boundaries of the *meta-* in *metalanguage*, although it is a *meta-* that also crops up in very different guises in terms such as *metadata*, *metaprogramming*, and *metaphilosophy*. *Metalanguage* is often simplified as "language about language", but doing so raises questions about when it is possible or useful to tell whether something is metalanguage or not. It also asks us to distinguish

whether something is language or not, a formulation that is crucial in historical accounts of subaltern subjects who are often asked to ‘speak’ through their (potentially symbolic) actions or situations, rather than through their written or spoken words, which have often gone unrecorded (Spivak 1999; 1988; 1984). Thus an account of a pirate shredding a ship’s deed invites further analysis of whether the pirate was indeed committing a linguistic act, as well as the extent to which that act was also metalinguistic.

In the context of the reflexivity or intentions of a speaker of metalanguage, Jaworski et al. draw on Jakobson and Silverstein to address this question of boundaries in terms of dimensions, including to what extent they might be more explicit or more implicit. In so doing, though, they also draw attention to the danger that such dimensions or scales, such as explicit versus implicit, may indeed appear dichotomous (Jaworski, Coupland, and Galasiński 2004, 54–7; e.g. Silverstein 1993). Yet this dichotomous nature is also a danger of metalanguage more broadly, for even to use the somewhat simplistic formation of metalanguage as “language about language” is already to draw boundaries, two of which in particular are worthy of further exploration. First, to assert that something is metalanguage is to claim that it is possible to know what language is, thereby dividing the world into language and not-language. For, to claim that language is about language, it is of course necessary to know what language is. So for example, sentences would belong to the group of language, and pirates (the living or formerly living beings, to the extent that they can even be considered apart from the term *pirates*) to not-language.

Second, claims of metalanguage also implicitly assert that language might be further divided into two groups. The first group is language-about-language, or metalanguage, and the second is language-*not*-about-language, or not-metalanguage. Thus the sentence, “language is important”, would belong to the first group, whereas the sentence, “pirates are important,” would belong to the second. Yet the boundaries between these two (admittedly oversimplified) groups are

deserving of further scrutiny, for it is easily possible to come up with items that transgress these boundaries. For example, paradoxes of the flavor of Bertrand Russell’s paradox or René Magritte’s “*Ceci n’est pas une pipe* (This is not a pipe),” might belong to both and neither group. For example, consider the sentences, “this is not language,” and “this sentence is not metalanguage.” The first is both language and (if we accept its truthclaim) not-language. Similarly, the second is both metalanguage and not, provided there is a chance that its truthclaim is valid. It is this last group, of partial paradoxes on the boundaries between language and not-language, and between metalanguage and not-metalanguage, that are the concern of this paper.

I contend that the pirates revealed in these sources belong to this last quasi-paradoxical group, and that their actions, as they are depicted in the sources, are both language and *not* language at the same time. I argue this point by developing two contradictory sub-arguments. First, I show that the ways these pirates are depicted destroying texts is an act that potentially *was* linguistic, in the sense that the linguistic content of the texts did play a role in their acts of destruction. Second, I also show that their preservation of texts was *not* necessarily linguistic, because *language* as a separate and identifiable concept need not have been relevant to their actions. Destroying a document such as a deed or contract does appear to call attention to the text’s linguistic (indexical) power, even if by negating that power. Similarly, preserving a document might be an attempt at maintaining its linguistic power, or it might have a different purpose altogether. It might instead focus on its economic and practical value without signaling any use, recognition, or access to the document’s textual and linguistic worth. The acts of these pirates, as they are given in the sources, therefore emerge as being both affirmatively metalanguage and *not* metalanguage at all. Mapping out when and why this happens can provide texture to the application of the idea of the Meta more broadly.

The Destruction of Documents

The king asking him how he durst molest the seas so, he replied with a free spirit, 'How dares thou molest the whole world? But because I do with a little ship only, I am called a thief: thou doing it with a great navy, are called an emperor. (St. Augustine's *City of God* (1972), cf. Pérotin-Dumon (2001, 25).

Benito de Soto lived from 1805 to 1830, during the decline of what, with variable dates, has been referred to as the Golden Age of Caribbean piracy. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries more broadly, piracy in the Atlantic developed from a crime on par with smuggling or illicit trade into a catch-all term for the extremes of moral corruption (Baer 1982, 4–9). This was due partly to the successive waves of piracy over this period. Atlantic pirates were originally called filibusters, and many of them were merchants who hoped to open up trade routes through conquest, outside of all regulation. They were increasingly joined by buccaneers, the members of a society of escaped slaves and indentured servants, related to Maroon communities, who flourished on the smaller islands of the Caribbean (Neill 2000, 165–6). Their nautical pursuits succeeded and they became such a force in the region that at times they were even used as a spontaneous militia for the colonial governments--thereby serving as a group of politically-useful outlaws, a function that has far from disappeared.¹³

By the early 1800s, however, the picture was radically different. The consolidation of trade routes required the politicization of the ocean as a way of policing the new oligarchies of seaborne trade (Mancke 1999).¹⁴ This, coupled with expansions in state power, in turn enabled more concerted policing of the fewer, larger routes, which in turn yielded the enormous profits necessary to support such a crackdown. This then inspired pirates to consolidate and go after ever-larger prizes in the open ocean. Indeed, one of de Soto's crew, the pirate Nicholas Fernandez, suggests that

he first sought out a larger brig to use for high seas piracy once armed convoys made it increasingly difficult to capture vessels within the Caribbean (1830). Over time, and especially as the use of standing navies grew in place of sea-born mercenary forces, characterizations of piracy became increasingly extreme. Gradually, piracy became linked to treason instead of banditry, and became comparable to contemporary definitions of terrorism.¹⁵ Indeed, when capital punishment was fully abolished in Britain in 1998, after over thirty years of disuse, it was by an act that threw out the penalty of death for the only two crimes that still merited it: piracy and treason (*Crime and Disorder Act, Ch. 37* 1998).

Pirates were seen to be diametrically opposed to the dominant order, but self-avowed pirates to some extent also trumped that order--not only by opposing it, but also by half-heartedly ignoring it. As we will see, at different points in their piratical careers, Benito de Soto and his crew pointedly destroyed documents, usurped documents, wrecked their ship for want of official papers, and incriminated themselves by unknowingly wearing their victims' names. Sometimes opposing mainstream conceptions of language, sometimes obviating it, these pirates dwelt in the boundaries of language and textuality. The next subsection looks more closely at the wanton destruction of documents. The destruction of documents such as ships' papers might be seen as aggressively metapragmatic in the sense that it comments on the use of written documents to declare ownership. The act of pulverizing an important deed to a ship may readily be seen as a commentary on the futility of such supposedly valuable and inviolable written deeds. In a related move, the very metalinguistic symbolism of this act may be seen as coming not from the pirates recounted in the sources, but from the sources' authors, as an attempt to present pirates as the antithesis of a civilized individual, such as the author him/herself, who would be expected to value documents like deeds, and texts and books overall. However, this is not the only interpretation, for the treatment of documents was part of much broader patterns of wanton destruction.

A Golden Age of Shredded Papers and Charts

Upon taking control of a ship, it is reported that often the very first act of many Caribbean pirate captains was to demand the ship's papers and then, upon receiving them, to destroy them.¹⁶ The methods of such destruction were diverse, ranging from tearing to cutting to burning. For one of de Soto's captures alone, two possible methods are noted: when the *Black Joke* took the *Morning Star*, de Soto's most infamous capture, one of the pirate crew chopped its papers either 'in two' or into 'inch pieces,' depending on the witness (Jones 1828). Yet before destroying them, while still aboard his own ship, de Soto apparently pointedly requested that the papers be sent to him together in a rowboat with the captain of the *Morning Star*, and took to firing cannons at the *Morning Star* when this order was not followed immediately (Jones 1828). The powerful symbolic nature of such an act is evident in its inclusion within even the briefest newspaper accounts of ship captures.

The documents are imbued with the symbolic authority of the captured vessel. Without them, the ship cannot dock under normal circumstances and the captain is unable to verify his or her command.¹⁷ Therefore, the destruction of the papers highlighted the fact that both ships were now physically and symbolically outside the realm of textual authority. This not only removed the ship from the sphere of law into a realm of illegality, but it also explicitly or implicitly pointed out the febleness of the laws, charters, decrees, and deeds that bolstered the authority of Western political regimes, which generally privileged texts and textuality. Far from the centers of power, a legal document which might otherwise serve as the kind of evidence used to sentence a pirate to hanging was itself under the direct control of whoever had the most physical power--and often this was the pirate him/herself.

Thus the destruction of the ship's papers, in this instance, as physical texts and manuscripts, appear to be inherently linguistic, a demonstration of the power that official texts could hold for the far-away governments which first issued them and

the subjects who carried them, as evidence of their own authority, aboard the ship. This very need, for the pirate to refute the privileging of texts by ripping them up, points to an awareness and distinct opinion upon the role and function of (textual) language in the world. The message was that such a valuable text, including official seals and signatures--texts which normally would have been highly prized, fiercely guarded, and protected by all aboard--no longer counted. Furthermore, they rendered the ship's crew and passengers official outlaws as well, requiring them to prove that they were in fact victimized castaways should they ever again reach a port. As such, the pillaging of documents was a powerful, and apparently intentional, method of using documents to both delegitimize and recruit the captives. In addition to acknowledging the importance of documents of ownership by destroying them, pirates are also depicted resisting textual regimes by refusing to obtain their own official papers, or Letters of Marque.

Plunderers' Permits: Letters of Marque

"Little thieves are hanged. Great ones go free." (proverb).

The above quotation, in various forms, is alternately attributed as a Russian, British, or American proverb. A related saying, given as an Italian proverb, suggests some justice for the powerful "Little thieves are hanged by the neck, big ones by the purse." Spurious or not, these sayings indicate how important it is, in discussions of piracy as theft-at-sea, to also consider the broader thefts of capitalism and empire.

Indeed, it is not surprising that pirates might have been familiar with the importance of the written word, because for in the Atlantic of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the difference between piracy and patriotic service often depended upon a document. Pirates were a threat not just to their victims, but to the state more broadly, precisely because they encroached upon the earnings of privateers, legal

‘pirates’ who were officially sponsored by a particular state in order to attack the ships of their enemies, a practice that was especially prevalent during the early days of European conquest of the Americas. The need for justification that they were conducting legitimate pillaging was paramount for states who sponsored privateers, because in practice the distinction was often blurred, with the pirates sometimes being recruited to operate as privateers, and with privateers plundering far beyond the limits to which they were legally authorized (Irr 2001; Lane 1998; Neill 2000).

As a solution, the Letter of Marque, also known as a ‘Letter of Marque and Reprisal’, an official document which acted as a form of contract between the state and the ship in question, sufficiently burdened with specific seals from the relevant leaders, became the standard proof offered that a ship was a privateer. This amounted to the assembly of a reserve navy of privateers before standing navies were ever organized (Starkey 2001). A ship with a Letter of Marque, which only attacked enemy ships as stipulated in the letter, acted as a significant boost to the forces of European Empire during times of almost constant war, but they generally differed from pirates only to the extent that they were officially sanctioned to plunder, not in the extent of their use of force (Fuchs 2000).¹⁸

Privateers functioned in a way that is reminiscent of the use of private contractors or mercenaries in contemporary warfare, and despite the fact that they were generally better equipped than pirate ships, in practice the Letter of Marque was the only state-authorized way to officially differentiate a privateer from a pirate. Privateers’ abiding influence combined with the difficulty of policing their behavior at sea meant that the *de jure* polarization of pirates and privateers was unable by itself to abolish the *de facto* similarity of their conduct (Fuchs 2000). Not surprisingly, forgeries of Letters of Marque were common, as was the theft and sale of them to the highest bidder. In at least one documented instance, however, a British captain hoping to plunder ships in the Caribbean obtained a commission from as far away as the Philippines, once French and Portuguese commissions became scarce (Bromley

2001). Privateers were an important force in Atlantic history, although only recently has scholarship in several disciplines begun to draw attention to the economic roles of privateers in the Atlantic (Fuchs 2000; Mackie 2005; Neill 2000; Pérotin-Dumon 2001; Starkey 2001).

It is notable that privateers at least required a Letter of Marque. In contrast, for targets that were considered to be beyond the bounds of civilization, all-out war was legitimate by definition. Attacks against indigenous populations, for example, whether on land or at sea, were widespread and generally accepted--although a pretense of legitimation did not hurt either (Fuchs 2000; Mancke 1999; Ritchie 1986). Thus, pirates were incorporated into the textual record because their targets were ‘legitimate’ ships, yet at the same time they were defined by the absence of such a Letter, by the want of a document. In this light, the pursuit of pirates was also a struggle over discourse, including both the control of any documents the pirates might have stolen, as well as the ability to end in one swoop (namely, by executing the pirates) both the spread of unpermitted plunder as well as related pirate philosophies or creeds. These two aspects of destruction, pirates’ alleged shredding of a ship’s papers and their want of legitimizing documents, could both be considered as a metapragmatic act, an explicit symbolic commentary on what language and textuality do in the world. Thus, some pirates might in fact be conscious of the power conveyed by documents, and be defined by a textual tradition, whether they indicated this by ripping texts apart or simply defying the need to obtain official permits. However, this contrasts with pirates’ preservation of documents, which reveals no such clear boundaries.

Preservation and Death

Now, when a little wrong is committed people know that they should condemn it, but when such a great wrong as attacking a state is committed,

people do not know that they should condemn it. On the contrary, it is applauded... (Mozi 1929, COW I, Pt. II, written circa 5th century BCE; See also Mozi 2010, 169 (17.3)).

Pirates were also avid preservers of documents. In addition to shredding a ship's permits, one of the first treasures pirates generally took when plundering a ship were the valuable navigation charts that ships carried. Often, the ship's original charts would be very specific to their expected route, and pirates needed to gain as many charts as possible from each ship they captured in order to have the option of moving within a wider space of ocean--and if the charts were not needed in the end, they could be sold.¹⁹

However, maps and charts were not the only documents among the goods stolen by Caribbean pirates. Documents--at least, those not vigorously ripped to shreds--were also among a ship's valuable cargo that were appropriated at will. Yet despite the fact that documents were highly prized, sources reveal that spoken and written language, in such instances, was not necessarily mobilized as a concept. According to existing accounts, suspected economic worth most certainly was an element of the theft, but it is not clear to what extent documents and charts were recognized as belonging to a category, discursively and practically, that was in any way separate or special from that which contained all other valuable goods. For example, one man, who claimed to be on board another ship that was captured by de Soto and his crew, reported that they were 'robbed of all our stores, part of our sails, boat, books, charts, chronometer, barometer, sextants, quadrants, compasses, glasses,' as well as the cargo book, the manifest, and several cases of biscuits, opium, and hats (Carrew 1828, 3). Thus, in the account, there is little difference given between the cargo book and the biscuits.

On the part of the pirates at least, economic considerations are routinely shown trumping textual or discursive awareness, which suggests that it would be displaced, at least in some instances, to view the theft in terms of its metapragmatic

implications. Indeed, in other cases it is not clear whether the pirate in question even knew that documents were inside the items being plundered. For example, in one trial excerpt, the ill-fated explorer Captain James Cook reports that upon being attacked with a sword by a pirate, 'I parried his blows with the tin box containing the ship's papers, till I disarmed him' (*The London Times* 1850). While it is clear that both Cook and the pirate were well aware that the ship had a set of official documents, and while Cook knew that the ship's papers were inside the box he used to defend himself, later in the testimony Cook mentions that the pirate asked him if he had brought the documents aboard--thereby suggesting that the pirate had not known what the tin box contained during the fight (*The London Times* 1850).

Unlike the destruction of papers described above, the un-named pirate attacked the box of documents without regard to the fact that they were texts at all, or that the box of documents necessarily worked in a different or somehow special way than would a box of another material. This shows that, in this case at least, documents were not the pirate's first priority (although apparently they were his second priority). Instead, the search for documents, and related attempts to identify the contents of the box, were secondary to the need to physically take control of the ship. So an analysis of the heterogeneous goods Caribbean pirates stole, as well as the very practical uses to which documents were sometimes put, including self-defense, suggest that there are instances where it could be mistaken to speak of their depicted actions as being metapragmatic or metalinguistic.

In these instances we see a fully pragmatic use of language in its material forms, yet one where language is so fully implicated in the material world as to lose the discursive specificity that would lend substance to a metapragmatic analysis. Foucault's (1978, 36) argument that it required ongoing effort to achieve the "transformation of sex into discourse", and the related emergence of sexuality as a visible sphere of life, might thus equally be applied to language. Perhaps there is nothing natural or given about the separation of language into its own sphere.

Indeed, Foucault showed that sexuality was produced in no small part through a proliferation of categories of deviance that isolated specific sexual acts. In contrast, here there is an apparent aversion to separating out the utterances, gestures, inscriptions, scribbling, etchings, and varied inscriptions into objects considered *texts* that form part of a broader sphere of communication that came to be called *language*.

Pirates Caught Wearing Their Victims' Names

This pirate was, forsooth, something of a philosopher in his way.
(Quoted from Cicero's *On the Commonwealth* (Barham 1842)).

One further example demonstrates the danger of overextending the conceptualization of language as a separate and abstract category of experience, and of taking for granted the boundaries between language and non-language. As in the above case, here is an apparent effort to claim and preserve language that nonetheless, upon further examination, reveals a disregard for language altogether. To adapt Mary Douglas's (2002) formulation about matter out of place, language out of place might simply be dirt, since the loss of context makes it not only unintelligible, but also unrecognizable as language. Moreover, in certain cases the accounts are indeterminate to such an extent that there is no clear boundary between where the language ends and the dirt begins.

The destruction and theft of documents were not the only ways that de Soto and his crew used texts in the course of their rampages. Having captured enough ships to live a life of material ease, they deliberately crashed their ship onto a coast that they believed to be in North Africa--and which was in fact, the sources agree, Cadiz, in the Spanish province of Galicia. De Soto and his crew hoped to be allowed to come aground without the proper documents by pretending to be shipwrecked slave traders. In order to make the farce seem real, the pirates forced their prisoner, the

former first mate of their mutinied ship, to dress up like his former captain, Maris de Sousa Saamento, an officer in the Brazilian navy and the son of an admiral (London 1830).

Authorities soon began to suspect something when they realized that the ship's manifest listed twenty-six unaccounted-for men and boys and that none of the surviving passengers and crew could give a convincing account of where the missing sailors had gone. Nonetheless, with 'all of the assistance and relief' of the local Vice-Consul and several other 'gentleman of respectability,' the castaways were conveyed into Cadiz, where they took advantage of the local hospitality and soon aroused more suspicion due to their remarkable wealth and exceedingly disorderly conduct (London 1830). The conceit might still have worked, however, except for the unfortunate coincidence that their former Brazilian captain's father was a good friend of the local Portuguese Vice-Consul. Likewise, their cause was not aided by the questionable behavior of the new Captain who, every time he passed the city gates--against all military custom--would nervously salute the guards (London 1830).

De Soto and his crew captured many ships, and accounts of them are notable for the cruelty they contain, even by the standards of the time, and in comparison to other similar accounts. However, it is notable that the final straw that sent them to the execution block was the fact that they were discovered wearing text that was out of place. Upon their eventual capture, many of de Soto's men were wearing clothes that still bore the names of their victims, literally embroidered into their coats and collars. De Soto, for his part, had escaped to Gibraltar, where he was captured with a large trunk containing a shirt inscribed with the name 'T. Goodwin,' the former captain of the *Morning Star*, their most famous capture (Aymerich 1828).²⁰

On a practical level, such an obvious mistake seems to be a serious oversight even for those who might have been illiterate. They may still very well recognize the incriminating possibilities of a text, even if they could not read it. Numerous possible

explanations exist for the fact that de Soto's crew donned the names of their victims. It could be seen as an act of defiance, although in that case, they would have also realized that the monograms would be incriminating. It might also be viewed as an act of ignorance, if they were unfamiliar with the practice of monogramming clothes which was nonetheless very common at the time. In that case, they would be caught by their inability to assimilate into dominant textual and linguistic regimes. More likely, however, it was purely pragmatic, albeit in a practical sense rather than a linguistic one. Possibly, after months at sea, they could not resist donning some of the luxurious clothes, whether or not they noticed that the embroidery contained letters. The pirates may not have been 'speaking' through the act of putting on the embroidered clothes. The embroidery that ultimately incriminated them may, at the time, have seemed irrelevant. In this case, then, language wasn't alterity, but dirt (Douglas 2002). The embroidery might have been there, in the background together, say, with the color of the buttons of the coat, but so seemingly unimportant that it didn't even form into a verbal expression or a fully-worded thought. In this case, language wasn't absent, but neither was it fully present as text.

In contrast to the destruction of documents, then, the preservation of linguistic objects on the part of de Soto and his crew, such as the secreting away of nautical charts together with other plunder and the donning of victims' clothes, indicates both an awareness of the objects and an instrumental use of them that fails to distinguish their economic and practical value from their linguistic importance. As tempting as it may be, it is not productive to only speak of these acts of preservation--of pirates' attempts to do things to these documents and texts--as metapragmatic. If the sources which report these acts seek to highlight their linguistic aspects, then it is all the more important to acknowledge the possibilities of other analyses that crowd the margins--indeed, of interpretations that attempt to move past a privileging of language and textuality.



Figure 1: The frontispiece of the original Dutch edition of Exquemelin's work, showing scenes of the torture inflicted by pirates that are eerily similar to depictions of the violence perpetrated by Spanish conquistadors during this era. The Dutch text reads [Sic] 'De Americaensche Zee-Roovers, Behelsende een Partinont Verhael van alle de Roverye En Onmenselijcke Vreetheeden die de Engelsche en Franse Roovers Tegen de Spanjaerden in America Gepleeght Hebben.' ('The American Buccaneers [literally: 'sea-robbers' or 'sea-bandits'], Including a Pertinent Story of all of the Banditry and Inhuman Atrocities that the English and French Bandits Have Committed against the Spanish in America.') (Exquemelin 1972. Image retrieved on 6 September 2016 from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Voorpagina_Americaensche_Zee-Roovers.jpg).

Conclusion: Writing as Theft

D-an ye, reply'd Bellamy, I am a free Prince and I have as much Authority to make War on the whole World as he who has a hundred Sail of Ships at Sea, and an Army of 100,000 men in the Field; and this my conscience tells me. (Samuel Bellamy to Captain Beer, his captive, quoted in (Johnson 1972).

In this article, I have analyzed the ambiguous boundaries of language among pirates who plundered official documents. The destruction of some documents served to reaffirm the linguistic aspects of pirates' actions, while their preservation of others revealed that, to pirates, *language* might not have been a meaningful concept. These accounts demonstrate that pirates' treatment of documents constituted both language and not-language, both metalanguage and not-metalanguage, at the same time. So the notion of the Meta in metalanguage is a slippery one. Yet in some instances pirates did engage in quite clear linguistic acts. Pirates named their ships, designed their own flags, changed their own names, and manipulated definitions of trade and commerce to their own ends. So if, as I argue in the introduction, researchers can be pirates, then by way of returning to the framing of piracy, it is helpful to conclude with a brief exploration of how historical pirates indeed could also be writers.

Even for pirates who would not have called themselves authors, they might still be considered inscribers of a kind. Many pirates wrote text in the sense that they named their ships and wrote or drew their own flags. In the case of Benito de Soto, textuality played specific roles in the masquerade which led to the eventual execution of both de Soto and his companions, the crew of the *Defensor de Pedro*, a former slave ship²¹ that they had renamed the *Black Joke*. The very renaming of the ship ironically indexes or indicates very different cultural attributes--namely, 'black' or morbid humor, as well as the unspeakably devastating 'joke' of slavery--than the regal overtones of the initial name, which alluded to the (then-king) of Brazil. In terms of

flags, to say that a good number of pirates were illiterate is in some ways a misnomer, because in addition to knowing how to navigate by reading the stars in the sky, many of them would have been familiar with a whole host of both national and territorial flags, used to either soothe or terrify their captives, as well as signal flags used to communicate between ships while at sea. The use of the flag to identify a particular pirate, especially one known to show no mercy, could go a long way towards subduing potential victims.

Pirates also toyed with their own identities, including nationalities, aliases, and the legal definitions of their actions. The members of de Soto's crew had multiple nationalities, including French, Spanish, Brazilian, Portuguese, and two Africans whose specific place of birth is not listed (Aymerich 1828). Nicholas Fernandez himself was born in Spain, raised in Cuba, became a mariner in New Orleans, and sailed with de Soto out of Rio de Janeiro (Fernandez 1830). They also had multiple names. The documents concerning the *Black Joke* point out four or five names for several members of the crew, a combination of aliases and nicknames. A pirate's reputation depended on a name that would inspire fear, but any particular pirate's name could incorporate several pirates who adopted it in succession, if need be, or could be dropped so that its original bearer avoided capture.

In addition, some pirates wrote emblems of modern nations: articles, or constitutions, which governed their conduct (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000; Rediker 2004), and not uncommonly had their stories recorded while they sat awaiting execution.²² Yet often, when text is attributed to pirates, it is the result of several un-named authors. For example, the testimony of Nicholas Fernandez, one of de Soto's crew who was later executed for piracy, was released as a sobriety pamphlet. The almost word-for-word correspondence among sections of Fernandez's account with the appended paragraphs of 'extracts from the well written productions of very able authors on this subject,' suggests substantial rewriting on the part of the publisher (Fernandez 1830).

Thus, even when a single denotative text is extant for a pirate, it indexes a multiplicity of not only discursive roles, but also of potential authors. More broadly, pirates who did not themselves write nonetheless did also serve as authors of a sort, by acting in order to instill fear not just in their immediate witnesses, but also in the audiences of those who lived to tell the tale, and publish it widely. The willingness to go bravely to the scaffold, then--perhaps shouting all the while--was another way that pirates inserted themselves into the textual record as an identifiable speaking subject, not only in the hope that their own words were recorded, but also that their very ferociousness would help others in their piratical pursuits.

Authors, Pirates No More

On rare occasions, individual pirates became authors and researchers, in the sense that they created documents--most notably, maps, journals, and navigational charts. However, they often did so specifically in order to signal that they were not (or were no longer) pirates. Many of these were the work of pirates turned explorers and conquerors, like William Dampier, Francis Drake, and (allegedly) Captain Cook (Pennell 2001).²³ In their now famous travel journals, they paint themselves as men of science as a way of distancing themselves from their former peers, thereby indicating that pirates might use the importance attributed to the ability to read and write as a way of changing their identities from pirates to explorers or adventurers (Neill 2000). The Dutch-French author Alexander Exquemelin (John Esquemeling), perhaps the most famous biographer of Caribbean pirates, was himself a former indentured servant who first turned pirate, then popular historian.²⁴ However, by creating an identity as a scientist or author in order to overcome their identity as pirate, these exceptions prove the rule that pirates, in contrast to the variety of examples above, were expected to stand in opposition to textual traditions.

The contrast between these types of expectations and pirates' variegated linguistic and non-linguistic acts further shows the difficulty of attributing *metalinguage* to them, and of considering many of their actions as linguistic. Even as writers in the broadest sense, pirates neither were incorporated into the dominant order nor were mobilizing its rules to work against it. Definitions of piracy were particularly significant in light of the feeble line drawn between pirates and privateers, as well as the accusations that were often made against victims who accepted pirates' offers, often at the threat of death, to join up and become pirates themselves. Such definitions are apparent emblems of pirates' linguistic ideologies more broadly: they exhibit a sort of sloppy subjectivity to an extent that proves that the notion of a speaking or writing individual wasn't present, wasn't absent--but was simply not that relevant.

The relationships between pirates' violence on the one hand, and the violence of government and economic actors on the other, serve to highlight the danger of privileging text and language. Put another way, the victims of pirates were also often violent, including military and merchant officers who upheld the brutal labor conditions aboard many ships. So, it would be a mistake to take authors' depictions of innocent victims of alleged pirate atrocities at face value, thereby attributing credence to the written sources and their language simply because they are what remains. Similarly, it would be misguided to assume that the authors and publishers of accounts about pirates were disinterested players who themselves had no interest in perpetuating violence. Indeed, Alexander Exquemelin (1972) took macabre delight in portraying pirates as rogues who brutalized Spanish conquistadors in the Americas. It is highly debatable whether this was an attempt at a factual account, or whether he was simply pandering to those who felt the full violence of the Spanish empire among their subject populations in Europe--including the Dutch (Figure 1).

Regardless, de Soto and his crew came to violent ends. De Soto, for his part, was hanged in British Gibraltar, the city of his arrest and initial refuge from the law. Of

those on board, only José Santos and Joaquin Palabra escaped imprisonment or execution. Santos dropped from the historical record by going into hiding. Palabra, a young adolescent of African ancestry who was between thirteen and fifteen years old, received a very cruel sentence nonetheless—he was returned to slavery in Brazil. The other African sailor, also named Joaquin though no last name is given, who had been a slave of the previous captain, also did not escape cruelty: he was murdered by the crew along with several others aboard for fear that he would turn them in.²⁵

This article more fully contextualizes the variegated boundaries of language that are invoked through use of the Meta. I have investigated the ways that pirates, and the documents they abused, might serve as both valid linguistic objects and subjects. At the same time I have shown that, primarily through Pirates' very apathy and inattention, they also serve to completely obviate the conceptions of language that are the substance and context of metapragmatic discourse. Thus, in these cases, the pirates' actions both were and were not linguistic—or at the very least, semiotic. In order to further extend metapragmatic theory, it is therefore important to develop a better understanding of the boundaries where such definitions overlap, clash, merge and more, and to avoid the semi-conscious privileging of written language which is the outcome of the many textual traditions of scholarship. One of the most fruitful ways to do so is through research literally at the boundaries of sociolinguistic theory—including topics such as historical reported speech, subaltern groups, the materiality of discourse, and the relationship between specifically linguistic utterances and broader semiotic systems of meaning. Stefan Helmreich (2008) has proposed the notion of underwater anthropology to encourage the further focus on sound as a means of moving culture. I would like to add that, as pirates of an academic sort, it is only fair that academics more broadly begin to substantively recognize our oceanic and piratical origins.

Notes

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2] As Lezra (1997) notes, there is some semantic slippage, however, because nautical piracy involves physical theft while literary piracy implies copying or counterfeiting.

3] Publishers claim that, on downloading sites, authors at different stages of impoverishment deprive the publishers of profit by freely accessing scholarly work. Yet in light of the high cost of downloading articles—fees that might otherwise prohibit research—the free downloads also help keep authors, and the publishers who depend upon them, moving forward. Without them, there might be little research to put behind the paywall in the first place, so one depends on the other.

4] The pirate Samuel Bellamy's ship, the *Whydah*, as well as a ship that is purported to be Blackbeard's *Queen Anne's Revenge*, are currently undergoing excavation. For an online multimedia example of one such archaeological map of the *Queen Anne's Revenge*, see Lockey (2014).

5] For an overview of the field and current work, see Duranti (2009).

6] For simplicity, I use 'meta-' in relation to terms like metalanguage or metapragmatics, and 'the Meta' when referencing the prefix's use in a broad variety of contexts to mean an abstraction that is 'outside' or 'beyond' the object being discussed. Thus metalanguage, as language about language, also implies an abstraction that is outside language itself.

7] One detailed analysis of subaltern textualities in Medieval European history is found in Ginzburg (1980).

8] A review of an index of biographical indexes can be found in Monaghan (1930).

9] For an example of the preference for the myth of piracy over historical narrative, see d'Ans (1980).

10] The analysis here of how illiterate subjects dealt with official sources is a complement to Stoler's (2010) analysis of how colonial governors, or those who produced official sources, reacted when

document-based knowledge broke down.

11] For a portrait of De Soto, see Lazaga (1892).

12] I follow Silverstein (2004) in citing Parmentier's (1997; 1994) extensive analysis of Peirce's conception of icons, or symbols that resemble, or otherwise directly evoke, the objects for which they stand.

13] On local Jamaican governments' use of street gangs as a security force, see Mackie (2005). For a discussion of colonial governments' historical support of piracy, see Zahedieh Zahedieh (1986).

14] Regarding historians' attempts to alter notions of the seas as a blank slate that is void of history, see Gilroy (1992), as well as Klein and Mackenthum (2004), Mancke (1999), Denham (2004), and Bentley (1999).

15] Several authors have actually advocated using the methods designed to fight pirates in order to subdue various groups they define as terrorists. These include Burgess (2005), who has been critiqued by Puchala (2005) and McFarlane (2005). In the wake of 9/11, the U.S. representative from Texas District 1 entered two acts into Congress arguing that Letters of Marque should be issued to private aviation contractors giving them free reign to combat aerial attacks on the United States, as noted in Foldvary (2002) and Paul (2001).

16] This would have had a strong emotional effect, like forcing a contemporary victim of mugging to watch as a thief set their cell phone, wallet or purse on fire, then proceeded to shred their credit cards, passport, car insurance, diplomas, and so on.

17] Constantine (2008) gives a detailed account of the role of documents in the administration and daily life of Gibraltar during the period that de Soto was in operation.

18] In the latter 18th century, the newly-formed U.S. government issued letters of marque to privateers to fight pirates on the North African coast who were capturing American ships, and in 1787, Morocco became the first country to recognize the United States. As a result of subsequent treaty negotiations, and in return for a moratorium on the capture of their ships, the U.S. would pay heavy tribute to the North African states of Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli until the First Barbary War (Tripolitan War) of 1801-05 and the Second Barbary War (Algerine War) of 1815. These were some of the U.S. government's earliest military campaigns as a new nation and they were

the first to decisively establish its economic and military, in addition to its political, independence. See Fremont-Barnes (2006). For recent scholarly treatments of the Barbary States (as they were termed in English) and historical slavery in North Africa, whose captives included the likes of Miguel de Cervantes and Daniel DeFoe, see Fremont-Barnes (2006), Heers (2003), and Vitkus and Matar (2001).

19] Illiteracy was not a hindrance here, as those who were not adept at reading charts could simply try to capture or coerce navigators who were.

20] But there are also implications of text on the bodies of pirates themselves. Tattoos were long specific to seafaring as a trade, and, as many pirates were themselves former seafarers, by the 18th century there were likely a significant number of Atlantic pirates who sported tattoos. Lasting physical injury – broken fingers, legs, and knife wounds, in particular – were also standard. As such, seafarers' bodies literally became documents of their profession and allegiances, and in more than one instance were used to identify sailors from the U.S. colonies who were captured at sea and pressed into military service for Britain on account that, as many of them were born in the former British Colonies, they were actually English subjects and thus subject to military draft, as described in Newman (1998). But permanent marks posed a danger for a pirate due to their use in identification since, unlike the names, jewelry, or clothing, which could be changed, tattoos could not be forged, only covered.

21] On the devastating consequences of the production, under Atlantic slave regimes, of Africans at sea as economically valuable 'objects', see Armstrong (2004). On piracy as the messy disruption of orderly slave economies, see Hameed's (2003) discussion of Gilroy (1992).

22] They also demonstrated an ability to manipulate legal terms to their benefit. In cases off the coast of England and Ireland, in the early 17th century, as it became too risky to deal with pirates who often depended upon the sales of stolen cargo, pirates and local dealers would collude to 'stage the absence of trade' (Fuchs 2000). The pirates would take their goods from their ship, a context in which they were obviously stolen, and place them on a remote beach or uninhabited island. Then, local merchants would simply happen upon the goods, which they could claim had simply washed up on shore.

23] The text of several of Cook's journals, and related sources, are available online at the South Seas Project web site [viewed 25 January 2015]: southseas.nla.gov.au/index_voyaging.html.

24] For lists of pirate booty, letters of marque, and other examples of pirate documents, see the Pirate Image Archive's collection of Maps [viewed 25 January 2015]: www.beej.us/pirates/piratemaps.html.

25] For more on Black pirates, who played a significant role in the development of Atlantic piracy as a whole, see Kinkor (2001).

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