

PREJUDICE AND PRONUNCIATION

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PERSONAL NAMES, being verbal forms by which we identify ourselves to others, have more value than the mere communicative function that is common to all words. Since a name represents the individual to whom it refers, it is intimately and indissolubly associated with all his other characteristics. Thus it is virtually impossible to consider any personal name objectively, for the myriad associations of the name intervene to produce a subjective bias.¹

The connotations of a name are greatest when it refers to an individual who is known to us. For example, *Richard Nixon*, *Fidel Castro*, and *Raquel Welch* immediately evoke a field of associated images and connotations. Such values may adhere even to the constituent parts of a proper name; thus, *Fidel*,² *Raquel*, *Nixon*, all of which as individual names potentially apply to numerous individuals, continue to carry with them the associations derived from their application to well-known persons.

The most common given names in a language acquire their connotations, not from famous individuals, however, but from persons bearing these names with whom speakers have everyday contact. A number of recent studies bear witness to the semantic potential of given names,³ and each individual has, perhaps only implicitly, formed his own value judgments and connotations for frequently occurring first names, at least superficially without reference to

1. In terms of general semiotic structures, a personal name forms the expression plane for a CONNOTATIVE SEMIOTIC, whose content plane is the set of impressions and images conjured up by the name in question. Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. by A. Lavers and C. Smith (Boston: Beacon, 1970), pp. 89-94; Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, trans. by F. J. Whitfield (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1961).

2. The given name *Fidel*, although nearly as common as the surname *Castro*, since the Cuban revolution has come to refer almost exclusively to Fidel Castro; thus, while followers of Batista were *batistianos*, those supporting Castro are *fidelistas*, and Castro's style of government is *fidelismo*.

3. E. D. Lawson, "Men's First Names, Nicknames, and Short Names: A Semantic Differential Analysis," *Names* 21 (1973): 22-27; "Women's First Names: A Semantic Differential Analysis," *Names* 22 (1974): 52-58; other references are given in these studies.

specific persons. Even names invented for fiction have a host of associations and connotations that far exceed their purely referential value.⁴

Although given names acquire many associations, the possibility for connotative values of surnames is virtually limitless because of their much greater variety. A semantic differential analysis of surnames, ranking them along subjective scales such as "good-bad" and "weak-strong," would probably be of little use. Not only is the stock of surnames too large for individual names to acquire consistent associations, but also, whereas given names generally reflect the predominant language of the area in which they are found, surnames more often reflect the ethnic origins and sometimes the social status of the individuals concerned, thus giving rise to highly idiosyncratic local differences in their associations. Surnames may, however, be grouped according to their ethnic provenance, and the resulting categories, even if broad and overlapping, may usefully become the objects of semantic differential studies like those that have been made of given names.

ETHNIC NAMES AND PREJUDICE

Names that indicate ethnic origin can be social differentiating factors as much as skin color, neighborhood of residence, occupation, religion, or sex. Ethnic origins and names connoting them may thus be grouped in a hierarchy of social status, although their relative order within the hierarchy varies from one region to another. As a consequence, individuals bearing names of low social prestige are often led to change their names to more advantageous ones—in this country, generally to names hinting at Anglo-Saxon origin. There is need for a comprehensive sociocultural study embracing different areas of the country, to determine what sorts of names are most commonly changed and what names are most often adopted. The reasons for such name change are at least twofold, generally interlocked: first, the social stigma attached to a name characteristic of an ethnic group with low prestige; and second, the "difficulty" of a name's unusual spelling or phonological structure.

In the United States, as elsewhere, there is considerable prejudice based on ethnic origin. Such prejudice runs the gamut from jokes to

4. J. Lipski, "Jarry's *Ubu*: A Study in Multiple Association," *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur* 85 (1975): 39-51, gives an example of the potential value of such invented names.

job discrimination, and worse. Following the Irish potato famine, which resulted in heavy immigration to the United States, prejudice against the Irish reached a peak in the eastern states, where many businesses posted the sign *N.I.N.A.* 'no Irish need apply.' When President McKinley was assassinated by a Pole, prejudice rose sharply against Poles, who were often equated with anarchists or terrorists. During the two world wars, German-Americans experienced a severe loss of prestige and even suffered harassment due to their origin. During World War II, many Japanese-Americans (*Nisei*) from California were interned because their origin led other Americans to consider them as potential threats to national security. Many New Yorkers regard anyone of Italian, and particularly Sicilian, origin as a member of the Mafia. Spanish-speaking Americans are also frequently looked down upon: in the eastern regions of the country, Puerto Ricans and Cubans are degraded by the term *spik* and suffer frequent discrimination, while Mexican-Americans in the Southwest, even if American citizens, are widely regarded as *wet-backs* or *greasers*, suited only for the most menial tasks. People in other areas of the country are prejudiced against Greeks, Hungarians, Ukrainians, or French (the Louisiana Cajuns), in addition to blacks, Orientals, and Jews. And among nearly all these people, ethnic origin is indicated or at least suggested by proper names.

TYPES OF NAME REMODELING

Since an ethnically significant name is a verbal badge,⁵ persons who have chosen to retain ethnic names may be subject to a variety of sociolinguistic pressures. A nearly universal phenomenon is the rendering of a foreign name into the phonetic system of the dominant language, usually by the individual himself in anticipation of the pronunciation his name will receive in inexpert mouths. In relatively simple names the only change may be in the timbre of a few vowels, for example, in such Spanish names as *Santos* [sæntəs] or *José* [howzėj]. In other cases, individuals may render their names virtually unrecognizable to the initiated, in an attempt to make them pronounceable to the masses. Examples noted among Polish surnames include [kəwátskij] for *Kwiatkowski* [kv'jatkófski], [grizbáwskij] for *Grzybowski* [gżibófski], and [ræzəkáwskij] for *Raczkowski* [račkófski].

5. Such names are semantically "marked," that is, they differ from the neutral or zero-connotation configuration of names.

In other cases a simple spelling pronunciation may be used: [zéjǰæk] for Polish *Zajac* [zájōts], [kwayətkáwskij] again for *Kwiatkowski*, [péjnvɪn] for French *Painvin* [pēvē], and [karválhow] for Portuguese *Carvalho* [karválu]. Such spelling pronunciations are sometimes the source of humor: men bearing the common Spanish first name *Ángel* [ánxel] are frequently referred to, in this country, as *Angel* with the English pronunciation and receive junk mail addressed to Mrs. or Miss. Spanish *Alemán* [alemán] becomes [éilmæn], French *Perrot* [pero] will be [pærət], while *Monod* [mono] becomes [manád]. Such changes may become so widespread that children of the second and later generations are not even aware of the original pronunciation of their name.

Frequently, social pressures lead to greater changes than sound substitution or spelling pronunciation. Part of the name may be omitted, and the remainder modified to fit the sound patterns of the dominant language. My mother's maiden name was *Pozarzycki* [pozażítski], sometimes pronounced [powzərískij] by Americans, a name which she was repeatedly cautioned would prevent her from getting a job; consequently she and most other members of her family Anglicized the name to *Pozy*. The Polish surname *Brifczinski* became, naturally enough, *Brief*, the Greek *Papademetriou* has been informally shortened to *Pap*, and such Jewish names as *Rosenberg* and *Greenberg* may become *Rose* and *Green*. In a more subtle ethnic metamorphosis, the etymological meaning of the foreign name is translated into the equivalent surname in the dominant language: for example Polish *Wisniewski*, from the word meaning 'wind,' becomes *Ayers*; *Kowalski*, from the word for 'blacksmith,' becomes *Smith*; Portuguese *Carvalho* 'oak tree' becomes *Oakes*; and Spanish *Molina* 'mill' changes to *Miller*. Such names often have an aura of playfulness about them, as though the name had been changed more as a linguistic exercise than from social pressures. Translating names is often associated with positive tendencies of social acceptance rather than with negative values of embarrassment.

UNINTENTIONAL ERRORS AND DELIBERATE ERRORS

Not all changes in foreign names are introduced by the name-bearers themselves. Americans often mispronounce the names of those from ethnic backgrounds other than their own. Speculation about their motives for doing so must be tentative, since very little is known about the psychological parameters. As a first approximation,

however, mispronunciations can be divided into deliberate and unintentional ones. There is also a third category, not clearly distinct from either of the others, but not quite identical either: unconsciously intentional mispronunciation.

Unintentional mispronunciation of ethnically stigmatized names is undoubtedly the most frequent type. It results from two partially overlapping causes: lack of phonological awareness or dexterity, and laziness. The problems of different sound patterns are too obvious to dwell upon; they result in foreign accents and determine the pronunciation of words borrowed from one language into another. Some individuals seem to be "phonetically deaf" and not to grasp differences between phonological systems, but rather to hear all foreign words, including names, according to the sound patterns of their native language. Other individuals perceive phonetic differences but, through lack of training or practice, cannot accurately reproduce the sound patterns of foreign words. Finally, there are "lazy" speakers, who can hear and produce patterns not native to them but who do not have the habit of doing so. They probably are a large proportion of those with "foreign accents." For example, in my Spanish classes there are always students who are capable of flawless Spanish pronunciation but who, unless constantly prodded, continually slip back into the easier patterns of English pronunciation.

Deliberate mispronunciation of foreign names probably does not have a specific cause, but stems from a general desire to degrade, belittle, or ridicule members of minority ethnic groups. Deliberate misrepresentation may consist of a grotesquely exaggerated pronunciation in the speaker's own native speech style, especially spelling pronunciations, even when the foreign name itself would be easy for the speaker to pronounce. Consider, for example, the pronunciation of *Italian* as *Eye-talian*. While individuals who use the latter pronunciation generally do so consistently, it is significant that this variant is never encountered among Italians but is frequently found, on the other hand, among those with a low regard for Italians. In view of the pervasive pronunciation of *Italy* and *Italian*, the exaggerated spelling pronunciation may, at least originally, have indicated a desire to ridicule.⁶ Conceivably, the same is true for the pronunciation of *Arab* as [éjræb], usually heard only among older speakers, but there may

6. For example, in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1st American ed., New York: Modern Library, 1934, p. 314): "The signor Brini from Summerhill, the eyetallyano, papal zouave to the Holy Father, has left the quay and gone to Moss street."

also be an association with the stressed vowel of *Arabia*. In recent times, the pronunciation of the name *Viet Nam* also offers two variants for the second word, [nam] and [næm]. While there may be regional or idiosyncratic variations, [næm] seems to be found more frequently among those exhibiting feelings of disdain towards that nation, while the variant that is phonetically closer to the foreign original is more neutral. To this example might be added the pronunciation of the automobile *Datsun* as [dætsən] instead of the more nearly Japanese [datsən]. In Texas, I have noted a preference for the first variant among individuals who disdain small, foreign cars. Again, however, it is conceivable that this pronunciation is the result of ignorance or is an innocent spelling pronunciation. The vowel [a] is often shifted to [æ],⁷ especially in borrowings from Spanish, although some place names in Texas are the result of deliberate mispronunciation resulting from hostile feelings during the Mexican-American war.

There is also the Southern pronunciation of *Negro* as *nigrah*. While some speakers feel it to be a polite variant, it differs only by the addition of a single consonant from the common pronunciation of *nigger* as *niggah*. In the mouth of a racially biased speaker, *nigrah* is often pronounced with an exaggerated emphasis on the first vowel, and in some instances a pause intervenes before the second syllable, perhaps indicating that the speaker had intended to say *nigger*, but changed his mind midway through the word. The variant *nigrah* gives a speaker the opportunity to suggest phonetically the unacceptable *nigger* without actually saying it.⁸

As another variant of this type of behavior, some phonetic feature of the foreign language felt to be exceptionally noticeable and humorous may be introduced into the pronunciation of names, generally in inappropriate spots. For example, most Latin Americans are aware

7. Other possible examples include the alternation between [a] and [æ] in the car names *Mazda* and *LeMans*, which appear to follow similar tendencies.

8. For a different view, see Roger W. Wescott, "Labio-Velarity and Derogation in English: A Study in Phonosemic Correlation," *American Speech* 46 (1971): 123-37, esp. p. 124, fn. 3. Wescott is of the opinion that currently *nigrah* is considered respectful while *niggah* is contemptuous, since "the crucial differentiator is not the stressed vowel but the posttonic [ɪ]." That this conclusion may not be totally justified is hinted at by the retention of the vowel [ɪ] in such forms as *jigaboo* (*zigaboo*), *nig-nog*, etc. Moreover, the present writer has observed speakers who exhibit the alternative form [nigrow], with a nonreduced final vowel that is reserved for more formal situations, and also the variants *niggerah* and *niggero*, which appear to be ways of getting away with saying *nigger*.

that Castilian Spanish has the sound [θ] where Latin American Spanish has merged it with [s]: thus Castilian *cinco* [θínko] versus Latin American [sínko] 'five.' This dialectal differentiator is often used by Latin Americans to ridicule Castilians, by substituting [θ] for ALL instances of [s], thus leading to the *thi theñor* type of pronunciation. Spaniards, vaguely aware that Portuguese has changed syllable-final [s] to [š], sometimes ridicule Portuguese names by changing instances of [s] to [š] in ALL positions, including word-initially. Galician, spoken in northwestern Spain, is also similar to Portuguese, although not as similar as many Spaniards seem to think, when they apply their rudimentary knowledge of Portuguese phonetics to Galician words by pronouncing syllable final s as [š] and final unaccented o as [u], both of which phenomena occur in Portuguese but not in Galician. In the United States, the vague and undifferentiated class of Oriental names is often parodied by invented forms of the *Ching-Chong-Chinaman* variety, and there are many people who are convinced that all Polish names end in *-ski*⁹ and contain difficult consonant clusters.¹⁰

UNCONSCIOUSLY PURPOSEFUL ERRORS

The final category, those pronunciations that are produced unconsciously, albeit with an underlying intention to misrepresent, is obviously the hardest to document. Nonetheless, they offer the most useful data from a psychological and sociolinguistic point of view. Nor is such an opinion a recent one: more than twenty years ago Uriel Weinreich adumbrated the problem when he stated: "The exertion of effort to retain the original sounds [in loanwords] is probably governed by individual and socio-cultural factors very similar to those which regulate the total amount of interference It would be worthwhile to study the differences in the amount of effort exerted, say, by the speakers of English in the reproduction of original phonemes when borrowing from languages with high socio-cultural status, e.g. French, or of low status, e.g. American Indian languages."¹¹

9. Actually a suffix indicating a titled landowner, *-ski* is added to the name of the farm or area from which the family originally came.

10. Thus, for example, the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, in his novel *La Región Más Transparente* (translated as *Where the Air is Clear*), invents the pseudo-Polish surname *Wczyliczylszly*, which has the graphic appearance of a porcupine bristling with consonant clusters and which would be unpronounceable even to most Poles.

11. *Languages in Contact* (The Hague: Mouton, 1968, first pub. 1953), p. 27.

Those remarks, although foreshadowing a significant range of possibilities, have never been extended in a rigorous fashion. The most this study can do is to offer some personal observations, from the area most familiar to me, namely the pronunciation of Polish names.

Polish immigration, while extending throughout all the United States, reached its highest concentration in the large northern cities. To this day, prejudice against Poles, and especially those bearing Polish names, is attested by "Polack jokes," ethnic slurs, and in response, by a large number of changed names. Because, as a whole, they are a comparatively recent group to immigrate to the United States, Polish-Americans have been, and often still are, subjected to discrimination and ridicule by more established members of society. As a concomitant, Polish names are frequent targets of mispronunciation, both deliberate and unintentional. Of particular interest are those cases in which a person's general attitude toward the Polish people is reflected by his pronunciation of a Polish name. Many Americans believe that all Polish names are, by definition, unpronounceable. While it is true that many Slavic names contain clusters and sounds alien to English, it is equally true that there are other Slavic names which should, in theory, present little or no difficulty to the average English speaker. The author's own name is one example, composed of syllables that are identical with two common English words, *lip* and *ski*, juxtaposed without violating any constraint of spoken English. Moreover, the name is pronounced exactly as it is spelled. Nevertheless, it is often and sometimes grotesquely mispronounced. The only apparent reason for the difficulty is that English speakers expect all Polish names to be "unpronounceable" (whatever that means), and since, on first scanning the name, they notice the characteristic *-ski* ending, their inherent ethnolinguistic "filtering mechanism" rejects any possible attempt at interpreting the name as an ordinary two-syllable sequence. Individuals become tongue-tied, try a number of variations, most common being the metathesis *Lipsik* or the epenthesized variant *Lipinski*, or weakly apologize saying "I can't pronounce it." Such difficulties are not limited to individuals whose lack of reading proficiency makes the accurate pronunciation of any unknown word doubtful, but is found also among highly qualified persons who pronounce other foreign words with ease and who have no problem repeating *Lipski* upon hearing the name.

Such ethnocentric behavior could be dismissed as incidental except

that it appears to be correlated with ethnic prejudice. I was born and raised in Toledo, Ohio, a city with a large number of Polish residents, where anti-Polish feelings were strong. During the eighteen years I spent in that city, my name was frequently mispronounced, or attempts at pronunciation were avoided, by teachers, salespeople, businessmen, and virtually every other type of educated and uneducated person. In Houston, where I moved later and where Slavic prejudice is nonexistent, the same name was never mispronounced in nearly four years. Following a subsequent move to Alberta, Canada, where there is Slavic prejudice, especially against the predominant Ukrainians, I reencountered the old problem. Finally, in northern New Jersey, where I have lived most recently, there seems to be a mixed situation. Because of the large distinct ethnic populations of the area and the highly diversified prejudices exhibited by groups at all social levels, it is difficult to determine significant trends accurately. There seemed to be a greater number of incorrect pronunciations of the name *Lipski* than might have been expected, especially because the mispronunciations often could not be attributed to prejudice. I noticed, however, that among those persons in whom ethnic prejudice was evident (and there is widespread feeling against most of the large ethnic groups in the area), attempts at reproducing the name often ended in failure.

Nor is my case unique: I have observed many Slavic and other distinctively ethnic names, such as Hindi and Oriental ones, which are mispronounced even though they are simple. For example, in Toledo, the realtor *Kapelski* has to spell his easily pronounced name as *Ka-pel-ski* on his signs, with large dashes between the syllables to convince customers that it can be managed by the uninitiated.

Pronunciation difficulties of the sort mentioned above are usually unconscious; speakers are not aware of their deep-seated feelings and stereotypes and often honestly believe they are faced with impossible situations in which they are making the maximum effort. There seems to be an unconscious, or at least semiconscious, ethnolinguistic mechanism that automatically regulates pronunciation according to feelings. It would be useful to determine the fidelity with which foreign words and particularly proper names are pronounced, as a function of the social prestige of the foreign languages and groups. Such a study would be of significance to ethnolinguistics, since it would shed light on an aspect of usage that has hitherto received little attention. Much effort has gone into studying the RECEPTIVE side of sociolinguistic encounters, for example, judgments of character

and status based on the way an individual speaks.¹² The study of the mispronunciation of ethnically significant forms opens the possibility of studying the PRODUCTIVE aspect of such encounters, that is, how an individual speaks on a given subject as a function of his own attitudes and opinions about it.¹³ It is clear that it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to carry out such investigations with the rigor characterizing receptive studies. The observer of such productive behavior is placed in a paradoxical position. He wants to investigate the possible effects of unconscious feelings; and yet to determine the existence of such feelings, he must bring them to a conscious level. Moreover, the source of mispronunciation is even more difficult to determine because of alternative explanations, such as lack of dexterity, which may be impossible to isolate accurately. Finally, any such investigation will need a control group, representing those speakers presumably unaffected by the feelings in question. Given the nature of social prejudices, the control group may have to be a distinct community from the test group, thus further aggravating the problem of standardization of the data.

At present, anecdotal presentations of the sort contained in this study are the only available evidence of the effect of prejudicial feelings on accurate pronunciation. Perhaps, however, through the combined efforts of dialectologists, sociolinguists, and other observers of language, a more accurate picture will emerge.

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12. For example, William Labov, *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1966).

13. For possible orthographic parallels, see J. Lipski, "Orthographic Variation and Linguistic Nationalism," *La Monda Lingvo-Problemo*, in press.

