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BACK IN TIME

A Name By Any Other Name

My favourite newspaper story in recent memory was about a pet parrot that went missing from his home in California. Nigel was his name and he spoke with a British accent, which he'd picked up from his owner. He disappeared for four years and, when he returned, he'd lost his British accent and now chatters away in Spanish, though apparently not about where he has been.

Nigel was a popular name for boys in England in the mid-1900s, derived from the Latin *Nigellus*, with roots that snake back a long way to Norse and Gaelic. It is an utterly English name that has no non-English equivalent that I am aware of. The story about the parrot amused me and then got me thinking about names and their cultural origins and how they are treated when they move from one language to another.

My earliest exposure to this process occurred very shortly after I was born. That was in Buenos Aires in the mid-1940s, when the fiercely nationalist State insisted that babies born on Argentine soil could only be registered with "appropriate" Spanish names, as decreed in Law # 18.248, Article 3 [see current, slightly more accommodating version at *www.buenosaires.gob.ar*]. My Anglo-Argentine parents wanted to give me two English family names—Anthony Grenfell—but were prohibited from doing so by the laws of the land. Anthony could be translated into Spanish, but Grenfell could not, so they eventually settled on an acceptable alternative and registered me as Antonio Hugo in the Argentine registry of births, and as Anthony Hugh at the British Consulate. I thus began life endowed with dual identity as well as dual nationality. Interestingly, both Anthony and Hugh (but not Grenfell) were subsequently included in the list of names that the Argentine authorities would accept. Nigel was also added to the list eventually, a clear testimony to Britain's deep roots in Argentina dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. The government's policy is explained in some detail at *www.argentina.angloinfo.com* under the heading Naming a Baby: "If a child is born in Argentina, their name must conform to a national list. The list of names permitted is extensive and if the desired name is absent from the list, it is possible to petition for it to be included. The main purpose of the list is to ensure appropriate names are chosen for children. Parents working for an embassy or with diplomatic status are exempt from this rule."

The intriguing question of how proper names are handled when they move from one language to another is obviously not a new one. It is actually something most of us have been familiar with our entire lives.

As a child growing up in Uruguay, where my parents settled when I was about three years old, I and my circle of little friends in the local British-American community read imported comics and watched foreign cartoons (at a cinema, since television had not yet arrived in our living rooms). Some of the characters we came to know and love were Walt Disney creations such as Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Goofy. In time, Spanish language versions of the comics and cartoons appeared, featuring *el Ratón Mickey*, *el Pato Donald*, and *Tribilín*. *Ratón* means mouse and *pato* means duck, so those names made perfect sense. *Tribilín*, however, was a word none of us knew. It was not a translation of the English word "goofy" and, to the best of our knowledge, was not a Spanish word at all. A made-up name? That was interesting; a strategy that suggested that rules in this area were flexible and, in fact, could be made up as one went along. A search of the Walt Disney archives reveals that Goofy went by a variety of names. In France he was called *Dingo*, a name that would have had questionable connotations in the English-speaking world, especially in Australia. In Germany he used no alias at all and was known as Goofy. Slovenian children knew him as *Pepe*, which in Spanish is a widely used nickname for men called José but for some reason was considered inappropriate for the Disney character. And in Indonesia he was called *Gufi*, which would have been phonetically ideal in Spanish. It would be interesting to know how the people responsible for those decisions came up with names for those characters in the various countries. What, I wonder, would they have done with a parrot called Nigel?