

Going back in time

by Tony Beckwith

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¡Gringo!

At the elementary school where I spent my childhood there was nothing worse than being called a *nab*. The school was in Uruguay, and the word was a hybrid, *Spanglish* version of *nabo*, which means “turnip.” Hardly as cruel as the slings and barbs we learned later in life, but at that tender stage it was a devastating insult. In the asphalt jungle of the playground you (and everyone else) would hear the shout, “don’t be such a *nab*!” Or worse, the whispered, “he’s such a *nab*!” The word itself was insipid but the energy behind it was venomous, and the target of this abuse was frequently reduced to tears. As I remember well.

It’s been years since I’ve heard anyone called a *nab*. Like most people, my peers and I progressed through a rich heritage of insults based largely on the various taboos in effect in our culture at the time: there were the fairly standard religious blasphemies, embarrassingly crude references to body parts and functions, gleeful allusions to the reputed sexual habits of family members, politically incorrect (to say the least!) characterizations of ethnic origin and, on special occasions, a no-holds-barred mayhem of all of the above. In the playground we learned that the only possible protection against any or all of them was a steadfast conviction that they simply weren’t true. One might feel scorched by the emotion behind the words, but all withering accusations and slithering innuendo bounced off one’s armor of self-knowledge. Otherwise, one was doomed.

So what is it about the word *gringo*? Why is it that people who can remain perfectly calm while their pedigree is being impugned can totally lose their grip when called a *gringo*? What is the power of this word, and why can it ruffle so many feathers?

In the first place, there is considerable misunderstanding about the origin and exact meaning of the word. For years, people have referred to a song that was allegedly sung by British soldiers during their various campaigns in Latin America early in the nineteenth century. The song was “Green Grow the Rushes, Oh,” and many have suggested that the word *gringo* derives from there. There are other urban legends that attempt to answer this question,

such as the explanation that it has something to do with the American “greenback” dollar.

The *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* begs to differ, and defines *gringo* (“of disputed etymology”) as follows: “Foreigner, especially English-speaking, and in general one who speaks a language other than Spanish.” It then goes on to say that the term refers to people from the United States, or England, or Russia, according to where in Latin America the word is being used. In some countries it is defined as a “fair-haired person with white skin.” The entry ends with this definition: “An unintelligible language.” No insults there so far.

A search of the Internet and other resources reveals that the word *gringo* came originally from Andalucía in southern Spain, and was a corruption of the Spanish word for “Greek” which is *griego*. Just as in English we say “it’s all Greek to me,” in the Spanish of the fifteenth century *griego* referred to something unintelligible, something foreign. Over time *griego* eroded to *gringo* and was brought to Latin America by the Spaniards who came with the Conquest. They used it in Argentina, for example, to refer to the other main group of European migrants (who were foreigners to them), the Italians. So in Argentina, *gringo* can mean an Italian, and since the Italian migrants moved out to the country to work the land (while the Spaniards stayed in the city to work in the restaurants and cafés), *gringo* came to mean “Italian farm worker.”

Meanwhile, in northern Latin America, the “foreign” meaning of the word coupled with its other connotations of “white-skinned” and “English-speaking” was tagged to the main group of foreigners in these parts, and *gringo* became just another word for *norteamericano*. Like other Latinos, Mexicans took exception when people in the United States appropriated to themselves the name of their common continental homeland by calling themselves Americans, so they called them *gringo* instead, and it stuck.

In the heat of battle we hurl whatever we have at hand, but the fact is there is nothing inherently evil or malicious about the word itself. It’s how you say it that counts. I’d rather be called a *gringo* than a *nab* any day.