

# A NAME BY ANY OTHER NAME

BY TONY BECKWITH



**Tony Beckwith**, a writer, translator, interpreter, poet, and cartoonist, is a regular contributor to Source.

**M**y favorite newspaper story in recent months 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. Nigel disappeared for four years, and when he returned, he had 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 proper names in works of literature, and how we approach them in translation.

To me, the name Nigel suggests an Englishman of a particular type from a particular period. I can almost see him, and I can certainly hear him. I arrive at this conclusion as one who, through family circumstances, life experiences, and education, is intimately familiar with British culture, but I suspect that those from other backgrounds

would not necessarily make the same assumption. Surely there are names in every language imbued with unmistakable associations that are invisible to all but the respective cognoscenti? This cultural gap underscores the challenges faced by a translator when a proper name is not just a label that identifies a particular character but is also a vehicle for nuances that the writer intended to convey to the reader.

Translation theory, of course, addresses the question of proper names and discusses a variety of strategies that can be used for handling them. When the name is simply an identifying label and nothing more, there are those who suggest that it should be carried over to the translated text just as it is, untranslated, since it has no intrinsic meaning or connotation that must be communicated. This is a fairly widely held view, though its adherents tend to make a distinction between works of fiction and non-fiction, and approach each differently. Some, in fact, hold that “foreign” names add a hint of that other reality that satisfies translators and readers alike, though not always for the same reasons.

But it is the other kind of name—the one that is loaded with meaning—that presents the most interesting challenges to the translator. What to do, for example, with something like the title of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in which the author uses “Earnest” as both the name of one of his characters and as a pun that hinges on the plot of his play? What will the translator do when faced with a name like “Ebenezer Scrooge” in *A Christmas Carol*, the novella in which Charles Dickens took an existing word meaning ‘mean or miserly’ and immortalized it as the name of his unlovable character? These are proper names, certainly, but they are infused with meanings that cannot be ignored, that must be considered and dealt with, one way or another. These are also high-profile examples, with a notoriety that not every literary name will possess. Does that notoriety matter? Is the name already famous in the target culture? Should we keep the original name in the translation? Or should we try to find a viable alternative that does the same work? A rose by any other name might indeed smell as sweet, but we are concerned here with words and meanings, not with fragrance.

The intriguing question of how proper names are handled when they move from one language—or indeed culture—to another is

obviously nothing new. It is actually something most of us have been familiar with our entire lives. As a child growing up in Uruguay, I and my circle of little friends in the local British-American community read comics and watched cartoons (at the movies, 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? This was interesting; a strategy that suggested that rules in this area were flexible and, in fact, could possibly 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 good choice in French but one that would have conjured up questionable allusions 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 (Joseph) and was probably far too common to have been considered as an option for the Disney character. Interestingly, he was called *Gufi* in Indonesia, which would have been phonetically ideal in Spanish. Much better than *Tribilín*.

My earliest exposure to the concept of translated names occurred very shortly after I was born. This was in Argentina in the mid-1940s, when the State still insisted that babies could only be registered with “appropriate” Spanish names. My 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 agreed to register me as Antonio Hugo in the Argentine registry of births, and then registered me with the British Consulate in Buenos Aires as Anthony Hugh. I thus began life endowed with dual identity as well as dual nationality. Interestingly,

both Anthony and Hugh (but not Grenfell) now appear on the list of 9,817 names that are accepted by the Argentine authorities (<http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/registrocivil/buscador-de-nombres>). Nigel is also on that list, a clear testimony to Britain's deep roots in Argentina, dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. The current policy is explained in some detail at <http://argentina.angloinfo.com/healthcare/pregnancy-birth/registration-nationality> 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."

Another childhood experience involved the nursery rhyme: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me." This was an early form of instruction and encouragement for victims of bullying, and the "words" in this context refer to the names children call each other. Name-calling doesn't end with childhood, of course, and here again the cruel or affectionate epithets people use to refer to each other in works of literature can be a challenge for the translator, since they often carry a great deal of cultural baggage. "Limey," for example, is a mild nickname for the British that has been widely used in several contexts, notably by American soldiers during World War II. The name originally referred to British sailors and was derived from the Royal Navy's custom of adding lime juice to their daily ration of rum as a way to prevent scurvy. It would behoove a translator to be aware of that backstory before deciding what to do with the term in, say, a chronicle of the Allied invasion of Normandy on D-Day. But I digress.

Getting back to the matter at hand, some of my early assignments in the field of translation came from agencies in New York whose clients were in the advertising business. They sent me long lists of words that were intended as possible brand names for products to be sold in Spanish-speaking countries, and my job was to decide if any of those names could be considered politically or socially incorrect, tasteless or obscene, or otherwise unacceptable by any stretch of the imagination in Latin American markets. Many translators have no doubt had similar

assignments. I found that this work not only reminded me yet again of just how much meaning can lurk behind a seemingly innocuous assortment of letters; it also sharpened my sense of what a name could be in my two languages, and showed me how much humor one could find in one's work if one were given this sort of leeway.

Today, thanks to a very different type of humor, a particular name has once again exploded beyond its linguistic and cultural borders and taken on an international life of its own in a way that can be neither planned nor forced, a result of random circumstances and—more so today than ever before—the inextricably interconnected nature of our global society. As I write, millions of people are marching through the streets of Paris and other world capitals with signs bearing a brief message: *Je suis Charlie*. We have used that name in many different contexts: Good-time Charlie, Checkpoint Charlie, Charlie Horse, and so on. Each version would normally prompt a translator to consider cultural contexts and connotations before deciding precisely how to handle it in another language. But in this case there is no need to search for any alternatives; the *Charlie* referred to on the placards has acquired a universal meaning of its own, one that we all understand and that needs neither explanation nor translation.

All these ruminations underscore the crucial importance of our cultural awareness over and above our intimate knowledge of a pair of languages. They also remind us that the cultures and languages we work with and which are so familiar to us are in a constant state of flux, and we must not fall behind. Myriad factors are constantly at play, from migrations of people that import new words, to technologies that create new terminology, to the ever-evolving languages of the young. As a translator I must keep my ear attuned to all those subtle changes of meaning if I wish to remain competitive in my field. With all that in mind, I'm off to Buenos Aires tomorrow, to be Antonio again for a while and see how that feels.