

# BY THE WAY

by Tony Beckwith,  
<http://www.tonybeckwith.com/>

## Cotton Candy



*Tony Beckwith was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, spent his formative years in Montevideo, Uruguay, then set off to see the world. He came to Texas in 1980 and now lives in Austin, where he works as a writer, translator, poet, and cartoonist.*

Men ever had, and ever will have leave,  
To coin new words well suited to the age,  
Words are like Leaves, some wither every year,  
And every year a younger Race succeeds.  
-Horace, poet and satirist (65-8 BCE)

I've been working on a story about the amusement park in the city where I grew up. It was called the *Parque Rodó*, and in the nineteen-fifties it was a special occasion destination for many families living in Montevideo. It had rides and stalls and rifle ranges and vendors of every imaginable kind, and on summer evenings I could barely contain my excitement when my parents took me to mingle with the lively crowds thronging the midway after dark. One of the special treats there was cotton candy — the same pink, sticky fuzz that kids still enjoy all over the world. In my mind's eye I can see the vendor's arm plunging into the swirling tub and wrapping the stuff around a stick.

On my mind's tongue I can taste the sticky sweetness, and in my mind's nose I can smell its hot, sugary fragrance. But I can't remember what it was called.

These days its Spanish name is a literal translation of "cotton candy" but I am convinced that in the fifties we called it something else. It was a local name, not a translation; a real Uruguayan word, or perhaps a variation on a name brought over by migrants from Spain or Italy in the early part of the twentieth century. Maybe it crossed the river from Buenos Aires, which was always a hotbed of spunky new urban slang. But I don't remember that the name we used was a mirror image of "cotton candy," or of its predecessor, the British name "candy floss".

British influence in the River Plate region had been strong ever since the very early nineteenth century and only began to wane

when America's star was on the rise after the Second World War. Uruguayan men-about-town often looked as though they bought their clothes on Oxford Street in London, and their wives patronized an upscale clothing store in Montevideo called the *Tienda Inglesa*. In British Community circles, men were called "chaps," Britain was called "home," and we'd have a cup of tea at 4 o'clock if at all possible, especially on weekends at the Cricket Club. By the time I was going to the *Parque Rodó*, however, American English was the dominant contributor of new words.

It's no use. I can't describe the night at the *Parque Rodó* when my father bought me a huge cone of that sticky, pink fuzz if I'm not sure what I used to call it. I could describe the wild ride on *El Pulpo* (The Octopus) or the more benign *Gusano Loco* (Crazy Worm) that rotated you, flipped you, and spun you round and round until you rather wished you'd saved the pink fuzz for later. I can talk about the *Rueda Gigante* (Ferris Wheel) that swung you up into the night sky, and sometimes stopped when you were right at the top, so that you could look at the lights of the city strung out along the shore of the Río de la Plata, a river so wide that you couldn't see the other side. I loved the *Tren Fantasma* (Ghost Train) because I'd ridden it so frequently that I was no longer scared of the woolen cobwebs and shrieking skeletons in the dark tunnel, and could revel in an unfamiliar and quite delicious state of fearlessness. My all-round favorite was a ride on the *autitos chocadores*; brightly colored bumper cars that whirled and jerked and lurched across the floor, hitting and

being hit constantly and from every angle — slam! bam! bang! It would be many years before I drove a real car, and even though the brightly colored *autitos* never accelerated fast enough, it was a thrill to be behind the wheel of a moving vehicle.

I could also wax operatic about the pizza at the *Rodelú*, where you sat on high stools at a tiled counter right on the sidewalk and ate spongy, deep dish delights smothered in tomato sauce. Or *fainá*, a flat dough made of chickpea flour that was greasy and delicious. They also served an excellent ice-cold draught *cerveza*, but I didn't discover that until many years later. The *panchos calientes* (hot dogs) at the park were of the five star variety (the German mustard was superb!) and there were *parrilladas* where you could get well-seasoned *chorizos* (sausages) and *chivitos* (thinly sliced tenderloin on a soft bun). My mouth is watering as I write, and I'm reminded that, for some people, a trip to the *Parque Rodó* was, above all, a gastronomical excursion. All this was going to be part of the story, which is on hold for now because I'm unable to write about the pink stuff unless I can call it by its real name.

It's not that I'm opposed to the idea of an imported, translated name replacing an earlier one. Not at all. A language shouldn't, in my opinion, be solid. Fluid, yes; gaseous, certainly. But never solid. Only classical languages of antiquity, now victims of rigor mortis, are rigid and do not change and morph and adjust like living languages do.

The languages we speak have morphed and changed in our lifetime, as everyone

knows. In English, “time frame” has replaced “period,” and instead of saying “often” or “frequently” we now say “a lot of the time.” What happens to language as generations come and go is as natural as soil erosion or rivers shifting paths. When words fall out of use they sink to the bottom of our stream of consciousness, where they are gradually buried by the silt of time. This is both a tragedy and a boon. A tragedy in the sense that something is lost, a word that was once part of the sound track of a specific moment

in time and space has vanished, and without it the edifice of the past is incomplete. The boon is that when long-lost words are rediscovered, like shards uncovered by anthropologists, they help a writer or a translator to define a period or an area, and to have a better grasp of a particular etymology.

In this case, I believe that the word I’m searching for is stuck down there in the silt, so I’ll just call this a work-in-progress for now, and let it go at that.

