



BACK IN TIME

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¡Gringo!

At the elementary school I attended in Montevideo there was nothing worse than being called a *nab*. The word was a Spanglish version of *nabo*, which means “turnip.” Hardly as cruel as the slings and barbs we learned to use later in life, but at that tender stage it was a devastating insult. Out on the playground you’d cringe when someone lost their patience and shouted, “Don’t be such a *nab*!” The word itself was insipid but the energy behind it could be venomous, and the target of this abuse could sometimes be 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 trove 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 spurious sexual habits, politically incorrect (to say the least!) characterizations of ethnic origin and, on special occasions, a no-holds-barred torrent of all of the above. In the playground we learned that the only 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 came originally from Andalucía in southern Spain and was a corruption of the Spanish word for “Greek” which is *griego*. Just as the English say, “it’s all Greek to me,” Spanish-speakers in the fifteenth century used the word *griego* to refer to something unintelligible, something foreign. Over time *griego* eroded to *gringo* and was brought to Latin America by the Andalusians who came with the Conquest. They used it in Argentina, for example, to refer to the other main group of European migrants with whom they came in contact (who were foreigners to them), the Italians. So in Argentina, *gringo* can simply 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 restaurants and cafés, it also came to mean an “Italian farm worker.”

Meanwhile, in northern Latin America, especially Mexico, the word’s “white-skinned” and “English-speaking” connotations applied perfectly to the main group of foreigners in those parts, and *gringo* became just another word for North American. Mexicans and most other Latinos took exception when the *norteamericanos* unilaterally appropriated the name of their common continental homeland by calling themselves Americans, so they dubbed them *gringos* 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 we say it that counts. I’d rather be called a *gringo* than a *nab* any day.

