

BY THE WAY

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¡Gringo!



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.

Given a choice, most people probably prefer to live among their own kind, and by and large would rather socialize with those they consider to be like them. But as populations shift and demographics change, many communities – whether they like it or not – are forced to face the challenges of diversity in their midst.

What happens when cultures meet? We see good and bad results in the news and in our neighborhoods, and in most cases it is obvious that, like other gaps, cultural divides can best be bridged when people learn to understand each other. To do this, they must get beyond the initial stages of culture-clash which, predictably, involve a fair amount of *misunderstanding*.

One of the most inflammatory moments in any clash tends to be sparked by those who resort to name calling. It sounds so juvenile, yet it happens among people of all ages, in

every race and culture, sometimes with tragic results. Why do we allow words to be used in such negative ways? And, how do we react to them when they are? Many will remember the children’s rhyme: “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me.” Does that good advice still ring true today?

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 and authority figures, politically incorrect (to say the least!) characterizations of ethnic origins 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.

Thinking back on my own experience, I have wondered about other words that, depending on how they are spoken and by whom, have the power to offend rather than contribute to cultural understanding. There are so many aren't there? Let's look at one that's fairly familiar everywhere in the Americas: *gringo*. What is it about this word, and why does 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.

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 Spaniards who came with the Conquest. They used it in Argentina, for example, as a name for the other main groups of European migrants (who were foreigners to them), the Italians and the British. 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." The word was also used as a

synonym for *inglés*, to refer to the Englishmen who came to the Río de la Plata region during the nineteenth century, seeking their fortune in the thriving sheep and cattle business of the pampas.

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 those 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 *gringos* instead, and it stuck. In its essential form it was not necessarily intended as an insult; it was just a name for a particular group of people.

In the heat of battle, verbal or otherwise, we hurl whatever we have at hand, but the fact is there is nothing inherently evil or malicious about this particular expression; as usual, it’s how we say it that counts. Personally, I’d rather be called a *gringo* than a *nab* any day. In either case, an understanding of the true meaning of the word can deprive it of its sting, and prevent an escalation of mere name-calling into an exchange of sticks and stones.

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Columnist’s remarks:

I wrote this essay several years ago, and in the back of my mind had always intended to do some more research on the subject. Surely, I thought, if the word *gringo* has been in use in the Americas for several centuries, it must have been mentioned here and there by writers who chronicled the life and times of early settlers in the countries bordering the Río de la Plata.

What profound satisfaction, then, to be introduced to the Argentine writer, Fernando Sorrentino, who approached the matter from a more local angle and documented the use of a synonym for *gringo* in the works of several writers, including the legendary José Hernández in his epic gaucho poem, *Martín Fierro*.

Fernando Sorrentino’s work focuses on the term *el nación*, which uses the masculine article to differentiate it from the Spanish word for “nation”. Like *gringo*, this is yet another name for those who “aren’t from around here.” As shown in this review, it comes from the language of the gaucho, the iconic, romanticized cowboy of the pampas.

In the following essay, Sorrentino’s meticulous detective work shows us how the word was used to refer to the foreigners who found their way out to the ranches and towns of the Argentine interior. At the same time, he provides a fascinating insight into the overlap of cultures that took place during that earlier phase of globalization, when Europeans set sail in search of India, and instead landed in America.