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# Calling people names

GERRY ABBOTT

The pronunciation of names in times of conflict

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WHENEVER people have wanted to express disrespect for a person or group – their indifference or disdain or outright hatred – they have traditionally selected a suitably offensive noun or phrase for the purpose. It is a practice that has persisted since time immemorial, and such name-calling is still a cultural feature that we pick up in our early school days. Typically, this sort of juvenile name-calling is an expression of *personal* animosity, and examples heard in England today include the traditional *Teacher's pet!* and *Tell-tale!* or the more recent *Fatso!* However, in recent years a general reaction against inter-racial name-calling has meant that such terms as *Chink*, *nigger*, *jid* and *wog* are no longer acceptable in polite discourse.

The same applies to derogatory terms for enemy soldiers – *Krauts* (Germans), or *Gooks* (Vietnamese) for instance – which have cropped up in times of war but have tended to fade away in peacetime. One exception to this at the moment may be the American use of the contemptuous *ragheads*, a term that I have heard used in recent Hollywood films to denote Moslem adversaries.

Towards the end of World War II, my father took part as a Royal Marine in the invasion of Sicily. Although I was too young at the time to think about the terms he used when referring to his enemies, I later found them significant as indicators of the military respect he accorded them. Hitler's troops, disciplined and reluctant to surrender, he simply called *the Germans* or *the Jerries*. He never used the terms *Kraut* or *Nazi*. On the other hand he treated the Italian units with less respect because in his view they tended (some would say sensibly) to give themselves up when all seemed lost instead of fighting on. He therefore referred to them rather dismissively as *Eye-ties*.

In Britain, respect for the German military

machine was being expressed in my hearing even as the Luftwaffe was destroying my family's East End homes: 'You've got to hand it to the Jerries, the bastards,' an uncle would say. Home from Sicily a few years later, my father brought out the following piece of British Army folklore. It illustrates the varying degrees of military respect shown for the effectiveness of the different air forces in their bombing raids over Sicily:

When the Luftwaffe came over, the Brits and the Yanks ran for cover.

When the RAF came over, the Jerries and Eye-ties ran for cover.

When the Eye-ties came over, nobody ran for cover.

When the Yanks came over, everybody ran for cover.

Nowadays, however, if you wish to show disregard or disrespect towards a real or perceived enemy, it is not necessary to use one of the established offensive words or phrases, or even to invent a new one such as *raghead* or *toe-rag*. All you need is a bit of deliberate mispronunciation. As we have just seen, *Italian* was changed to *Eye-talian* and shortened to *Eye-tie*. Indeed, as I write, the President of the United States and many of his advisors and military spokesmen are referring to their perceived adversaries in a similar way. They speak of *Eye-rack* and the *Eye-rackies*, and (although there is as yet no military conflict there) *Eye-ran*.

Such (mis)pronunciations give the impres-

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GERRY ABBOTT started teaching English to European refugees in London in 1958. After a career in English language teaching in Thailand, Jordan, Uganda, Yemen, Malaysia, Cameroon, Burma and elsewhere, he is now an Honorary Fellow of the University of Manchester, UK.

sion that those two nations are viewed as objects of contempt. In fact, deliberate mispronunciations have proliferated to the extent that pretty nearly anything associated with Islam is seen by many in the West as more or less contemptible. The most favoured way of mispronouncing disyllabic names is to remove any stress from the second syllable and place a heavy emphasis on the first: *IsLAAM* becomes *Izlum*, *imAAM* becoming *Eemam*, *jiHAAD* becoming *JEEhad*. Place-names are not exempt in this process: *BaghDAAD* becoming *BAGHdad*, and *RiYAADH* becoming *REEyadh*. In a social context you can, if you choose, arouse animosity in someone by persistently mispronouncing his name; in a political context, such lack of respect seems almost calculated to increase international conflict.

Of course, in the frenetic world of today's media it would be unrealistic to expect politicians, announcers and newsreaders to pronounce foreign names perfectly. But, in the name of good will, efforts should I think be made to insist on approximations much closer to the original pronunciations than those above. Because of the power of the USA, what was said in Washington yesterday tends to be imitated in London today, and I have heard British reporters use such mispronunciations on BBC broadcasts. However, one unfortunate mispronunciation, which was not as far as I know imported from the States, has been in use in Britain for many years now, and sounds like *Packy-Stan*. This has been abbreviated, producing the derogatory term *Paki*. In Pakistan itself, people call their country something more like (for me) *Parky's Tarn*, and I have often wished that everyone would pronounce

it this way; calling someone a 'Parky' rather than a 'Packy' wouldn't sound so bad in my ears.

But then, it's the intention of the speaker that counts, and changing people's intentions is even more difficult than getting them to change their pronunciation. The difference between the form of an utterance and the nature of the speaker's intention was brought home to me by an incident that occurred when I was working in Uganda. A Greek mining engineer working in the south of the country had bought a new white Mercedes-Benz. When word came that it had arrived at the nearest port, he asked his Ugandan driver to go to Mombasa, clear it through Customs and drive it back. When his return was overdue, the Greek became more and more worried. Then one of his men brought news that the new car had gone off the road into a ravine and was a write-off. Hurrying to the scene, he found the sorrowful driver only slightly hurt and shouted,

'You stupid great black bastard!'

Capture that utterance in isolation on tape and out of context and it would be shocking. But, as the Greek said it, he hugged his driver tearfully and added,

'I thought you'd killed yourself!'

That was a case of injudicious choice of vocabulary, of course. But I think it would be a good idea if, before we start – needlessly and persistently – to mispronounce a name, we pause to consider how any listener is likely to interpret our intention. ■