

## Yvonne and Juanita Face the English Language

The voracious appetite of the English language for foreign words is well known and elaborately documented. For centuries, English has shamelessly acquired words and made them its own. Proper names, however, can often maintain their foreign identity longer than other words simply because they are recognizably French, Italian, or whatever. But the same forces of anglicization operate for these words as well, and the relationship between spelling and pronunciation often produces diverse and divergent adaptations when personal names move from one language to another. The French name *Yvonne* and the Spanish name *Juanita* provide two interesting cases which show the intersecting influences of spelling and pronunciation on names which are grafted onto American family trees.

Yvonne was an unusual, but not unknown name in English when it gained wide publicity as the name of one of the Dionne quintuplets and, to a lesser extent, as the name of the Hollywood dancer and actress, Yvonne de Carlo. The frequent publication of the name in newspapers and popular magazines in the 1930's and 1940's exposed the name, in print, to people who had heard the name only rarely, if at all.

For readers who knew no French, the struggle to cope with the initial letter y without a vowel immediately following generated three solutions to the problem: supply the missing vowel to make the y pronounceable in English (yuh), (yah); treat y as a consonant (wye); approximate the unfamiliar initial sound and modify the stress (ee).

The second syllable also caused pronunciation problems. Was the spelling -onne pronounced as one syllable or two? In more than one French name, the silent final -e in a syllable -one or -onne has been pronounced by analogy with Spanish or Italian names which end with a vowel. Thus, Leone often assimilates to Leona. In addition, the -vonne spelling gave ambiguous clues about the pronunciation of -o-. Was the medial vowel long (-vone, as in phone or tone) or short (-vahn, as in bonbon)? All solutions had willing patrons who advanced at least four pronunciations: -vone, -vone + uh, -vahn, and -vahn + uh.

Thus, with the traditional French spelling, Yvonne, at least eight different pronunciations have been noted,<sup>1</sup> in addition to various approximations of the French.

1. ee-váhn
2. ih-vóne
3. ee-vóne
4. ée-vóne
5. yuh-váhn
6. yuh-vóne

<sup>1</sup> The observation of the authors has been intensive in eastern Kentucky and eastern Oklahoma and has included thirty years' reading of legal records in Creek County, Oklahoma, as well as regular reading of local newspapers and a wide acquaintance with long-term residents in both regions.

## 7. yáh-vóne

## 8. wýe-vóne

Cases one, three, and four represent a slight lengthening of the initial vowel, but the stress falls on the first syllable only in the instance when the vowels in both syllables are fully lengthened. Cases five through seven represent a more rigorously American adaptation of the first syllable, the (yuh) moving to (yah) to accommodate the stress. The last case represents the most overt acknowledgment of the foreignness of the work, for it creates a new pronunciation for the initial letter y in addition to lengthening the vowel in the second syllable. In all cases, the lengthening of the vowel in the second syllable is favorable to the development of a stress pattern with two equal accents, a spondee.

It is not surprising to see one of the cardinal features of the Germanic languages at work in this pattern. Three of the eight English pronunciations have added stress on the first syllable. And each of these Englished pronunciations which has an accent on the first syllable has generated at least one spelling variant. The third case (ee-vóne), with support from the second case (ih-vóne), has resulted in Yvone.<sup>2</sup> The fourth case (éé-vóne) has given us Evonne. The seventh variant (yáh-vóne) produced Javonne. The eighth (wýe-vóne) generated Wyvonne.

The variation in the pronunciation of the second syllable, when combined with variations in the first, has caused additional spelling variants. The appearance of Yvonne as Yvonna, not unlike the Leone/Leona exchange mentioned above, is joined by Evonna, Javonna, and Wyvonna.

One case is particularly striking in this larger context. A woman, born about 1915, whom members of our family have known since she was an infant, was named at birth "Yvonne."<sup>3</sup> Her family spelled the name in the traditional manner but anglicized the pronunciation (wýe-vóne). When she was an adult, this woman changed the spelling to Wyvonne in order to avoid confusion. The circle was complete: a spelling, Yvonne, which had, in English, generated a new pronunciation, was then, by the force of that very pronunciation, altered to a new orthography.

The more common name, Juanita, has a similar but much less elaborate history in English. Unlike Yvonne, Juanita has long been in widespread use, probably from close contact with native speakers of Spanish in the American southwest. The problem of adaptation was usually (not always, as one instance will show) in how to solve the correct spelling of a name whose phonemes had no unique letters in the English alphabet. Some people saw the name before hearing it, or cared more for what they saw than what they heard, and came up with a full-blown four-syllable (jéw-ah-née-tuh). This pronunciation has worthy antecedents in the fully anglicized pronunciation of Lord Byron's "Don Juan." The most common variants of the name Juanita, however, have been attempts to spell the sounds which are heard. Three pronunciation-spellings are known: Wanita, Waneta, and Waneeta. The last spelling removes all ambiguity of pronunciation according to any recognized American spelling rules.

While many other foreign names have experienced wonderful sea-changes in

<sup>2</sup> This spelling variant also is used for the first pronunciation (ee-váhn).

<sup>3</sup> The woman in question was a member of a hard-working and comfortable middle-class family in a prosperous Appalachian town.

the process of anglicization, the records of Yvonne and Juanita demonstrate long-recognized tendencies of English speakers to pronounce words as they see them, to move the stress to the front of words, and to spell words as they pronounce them. And the forms Wyvonne and Waneeta, while unsophisticated, are products of some of the same tendencies for linguistic change which have made our language the rich instrument it is today.

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#### Figurative Use of *alley* in English-Language Placenames

The figurative use of *alley* is not as frequent as that of *row* [(see my "Row in Some English Placenames: With an Excursus on Yiddish *gas* 'street' and Hebrew *rechov* 'street'") *Names*, 32 (1984), 347-349]. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists *the alley* "particularly applied to *Exchange Alley*, London, scene of the gambling in South Sea and other stocks," with citations from 1720 (*Change Alley*), 1775 (*the Alley*), and 1863 (*Exchange Alley*, with reference to the South Sea Affair). A *Dictionary of Americanisms* has *tin-pan alley* "a district frequented by musicians, song writers, and publishers, originally used of the theatrical section or Broadway and suggestive of the tinny quality of the cheap, over-used pianos in music publishers' offices" (hence *tin-pan alleyite*). Its earliest citation is from 1914, but Webster's *Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* dates it to 1899. The Brill Building in Manhattan has for several decades been considered New York City's tin-pan alley and some people believe that it was the original Tin-Pan Alley, but this is not correct since it was built after 1899.

A *Dictionary of Americanisms* also has *gambling alley* "a shabby locality or place where gambling is indulged in" (1848) and *Lame Duck Alley* "name given by reporters to a screened-off corridor in the White House offices where statesmen who went down in the recent electoral combat may meet" (so defined in a 1910 citation, the only one in this dictionary). Beginning in the 1970s, one of the walkways at Orchard Beach (Bronx, NY) was nicknamed *Las Vegas Alley* because it was frequented by prostitutes, gamblers, and illegal vendors (see *The New York Times*, Aug. 27, 1984, p. B1); by 1984 these people had been removed and the name was only a memory. A stretch of a street in Jackson Heights (Queens, NY) used as cruising area by gay men on foot and in motor vehicles is known to them as *Vaseline Alley* (in allusion to vaseline used as a lubricant in anal intercourse). *Bootlegger's Alley* (which should probably be *bootleggers' alley*) is listed on p. 349 of my note on *row*.

Webster's *Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* lists only *tin pan alley* (which is the only one of these names to have gained wide currency, defining it as "a district used or occupied chiefly by composers or publishers of popular music" and "the body or realm of composers or publishers of popular music." We thus see here a semantic development found in *row* too:

*tin-pan alley* first had a geographic reference but later came to be used without such a reference too (as far as I can tell the other five names listed above have geographic reference only).

No English dictionary notes this productive use of *alley*. Except for *(Ex)change Alley*, all of the terms refer to something illicit, secretive, less than fully respectable, or not of the highest order. That *(Ex)change Alley* and the other terms thus belong in two separate categories is not coincidental: the sense "a thoroughfare through the middle of a block giving access to the rear of lots or of buildings" is an American (in British English this thoroughfare is called *mews*), hence American English *alley* can be used to allude to behind-the-scenes activity. British English *alley* does not have this connotation; hence *(Ex)change Alley* lacks it.

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