

Translation Pronunciation: A Note on Adaptation of Foreign Surnames in the United States*

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In the second *Supplement to The American Language*, H.L. Mencken refers, in his chapter on "Proper Names in America," to "a man always called *Smith*" who still "writes his name *Schmidt*" (409-10). Mencken secured his information from an unpublished "MLA paper" by Elda O. Baumann, which had kindly been put at his disposal. The example came, according to Mencken, from "the somewhat decadent village of Potosi, Wis."¹

The process Mencken describes is not an isolated occurrence, although numerous constraints limit its applicability. But it deserves a place among the various categories by which non-English surnames are modified in the United States. Mencken mentions a number of these types with illustrations from German surnames: translation (*Carpenter* for *Zimmermann*); adaptation to the English sound pattern ([kouk], [kok] or even [kauč] for *Koch* [koχ], along with the now well-known [kač] used by the Mayor of New York city); partial adaptation (*Studebecker* becomes *Studebaker*). The process that provides a *Smith* pronunciation for *Schmidt* might best be termed "translation pronunciation."

When I was growing up in Jacksonville, a town of about 15,000 in central Illinois, during the teens and 20's, I knew several brothers whose family name, as I frequently and clearly heard, was ['fraidi]. Only in the late 20's did I see the name written, to my surprise, as *Freitag*. Despite the oddities of English orthography, it is difficult to contrive any way in which the graphic *Freitag* could become the spoken ['fraidi] if the parallelism of German *Freitag* and English *Friday* had not been obvious.

My colleague Eric Hamp (who has also provided other helpful suggestions) has called my attention to the fact that the restressed [-dei] in this compound would have produced a closer English/German parallel than the older reduction to [-di]. This latter was the only form I recall from Jacksonville and hence emphasizes the phonetic non-parallelism.

Another example, known to me from reliable and circumspect informants of that period, comes from Southern Illinois. Widely-scattered members of

a family live there whose name is pronounced [kʊk] but spelled *Koch*. While the substitution of English [k] for the sound spelled in German as *ch* is no cause for surprise, the vowel substitution again points to a “translation pronunciation.”

My colleague Raven McDavid, to whom I mentioned this adaptation type, doubled my number of clear examples (as well as offering numerous other useful suggestions). One was a family whom he met in 1950 in Delavan, Illinois, who spelled their name *Albrecht* but pronounced it [ˈɔlbrait]; the other is the engineering firm of F.L. Smidth (originally Danish) of Cresskill, New Jersey, which regularly pronounces its name as [smɪθ].

The [ˈɔlbrait] pronunciation is also vouched for by Eric Hamp for a student who spells her name in the variant form *Albrycht*. One of my own students, Louis Pitschmann, reports a similar [ˈɔlbrait]/*Albright* parallel from Chardon in northeastern Ohio.² A family from Cleveland whom he knows insists on the pronunciation [ˈsʌmər] for their surname spelled *Sommer*.

A student of mine from the 1930's possibly illustrates partial adaptation of this type: He spelled his name *Reiche*, but told me to pronounce it [ˈrɪtʃi]. Both he and his father, whom I met, assured me that they knew nothing of the origin of this pronunciation: “That’s the way it’s always been.” The English (Scottish?) surname type *Ritchie* (and variants) may also have provided a partial model.

The limitations on “translation pronunciation” are quite obvious. Only closely cognate languages would be likely to offer forms which are suitably equivalent to permit the leap from one language to the other. Hence I would assume that in the United States the examples would be likely to come from such Germanic languages as German, Dutch, Frisian, or one of the Scandinavian tongues. The influx of Norman French and later French forms makes French influence possible too: Raven McDavid calls my attention to the hotel in Miami Beach, *Fontainebleau*, pronounced [ˌfauntɪˈblu], and to the Ohio town of Bellefontaine, illustrating partial adaptation as [bɛlˈfauntɪ]. Might there be parallels also in Latin America for a similar adaptation among the Italian immigrants?

In any case it would be useful to collect what examples there are while they may still be around. For they are most frequent in smaller stable communities, and increasing mobility will be likely to endanger either the spelling or the pronunciation. I have lost track of the family [ˈfraidi]/*Freitag*. But in a parallel case a recent student of mine in Chicago spelled his name *Montag* but used only the expected Anglicized pronunciation [ˈmountæg]. It would be valuable, however, to learn how widespread this practice actually is.³

Notes

*This paper was prepared in 1973 for what was planned as a special volume commemorating the 85th birthday of the late Prof. Clarence E. Parmenter. Unfortunately, the Festschrift never appeared. I was pleased, however, to have the opportunity to offer this note to students of onomastics in American English. I have not been able to go over the recent literature for possible new contributions. Instead, I am "letting the record stand" (a favorite phrase of Eric Hamp). If the article gives an impetus to further study in this area, it will have accomplished its purpose.

¹The other example cited, "one called *Bryan* writes it *Broihahn*," would seem to be an unusual reverse case: the attempt to spell a typically English surname in the (dialect) orthography of Potosi German. In any event, it clearly exemplifies a different process from that which produced *Smith* alongside *Schmidt*. The latest edition by Raven McDavid (1963: 581) lists both examples but without specific reference to Potosi.

²Although it is not immediately pertinent, Louis Pitschmann also reports the case of two brothers in Chardon, whose family has been in the United States since the turn of the century. Both pronounce their surname as [fults], but one spells it conventionally as *Schultz*, while the other spells it *Sulc*, although insistent on the "correct" pronunciation. Not knowing the family history, I cannot give an authenticated explanation. But it would appear to be an attempt to preserve the German pronunciation in a Hungarian-speaking environment before the emigration. The one brother has adopted the more "conventional" (i.e., German) spelling.

³An Associated Press dispatch from Atlanta, published in the *Santa Cruz (Calif.) Sentinel* of 14 March 1985 (A-8), reports in connection with a legal settlement between the Coca-Cola Company and a man who changed his name:

"Frederick Koch, 54, of West Brattleboro, Vt., changed his name legally to Coke-Is-It in November, saying he was tired of hearing people pronounce his name as 'Kotch' or 'Cook.'

"'Coke is it' was the answer he always gave for the correct pronunciation, he said. . . ."

This gives evidence for the persistence of the translation pronunciation as "Cook." It also gives evidence for the reverse process: changes in English orthography to preserve the "correct pronunciation," often conceived of as the original pronunciation (see note 1).

References

- Mencken, H.L. *The American Language. Supplement II*. New York: Knopf, 1948.
 Mencken, H.L. *The American Language*. Rev. and abridged by Raven I. McDavid, Jr. New York: Knopf, 1963.