

Sly Slurs: Mispronunciation and Decapitalization of Group Names

Irving Lewis Allen

Derogatory, generic names for ethnic groups in historical American English, or in the language of any plural society, serve social uses of informal social control in the speech community similar to those that personal nicknames serve in smaller groups. Most nicknames for outgroups attempt to stratify groups in the local community, or to protest the ranking, by replacing the proper, preferred name of a group with an altogether different name with negative semantics. But sometimes name-callers grudgingly concede the accepted, standard name for a group, including its spelling, and then deliberately alter the conventional or polite pronunciation of the name. The slur is connoted by denying the standard of the speech community. Printed representations of these phonetic alterations usually appear later, which conventionalizes the slur, print reinforcing speech and the converse. A second, slyer technique of pejoration gives lip service to the preferred, proper name of the group in speech and in spelling, but in writing denies the conventional capital initial to the group name in order to connote the slur.

Both devices are, of course, well known, but are of additional onomastic interest because they reveal a complicated interplay of ethnic ideology and the usage of names for ethnically stigmatized groups. Taken together these devices display a microcosm of ethnic discourse in American life.

Phonetic Alterations

Deliberate mispronunciation is the more common of the two techniques. The same tactic of verbal abuse is applied at the individual level to ethnically stigmatized personal names and at the group level to ethnic group names. John M. Lipski explains how prejudice is expressed in deliberate mispronunciations of "foreign" surnames and how the incidence of this varies with the level of prejudice in local communities.

Group Names

Prejudice also prompts the mispronunciation of names of nationalities and of ethnic groups, and best known are *Negro*, *Italian*, and *Arab*. Phonetic twists, however, can be put on the name of any ethnic group with the same perjorative effect.

Both Raven I. McDavid, Jr., and Susan Leas have treated the white Southern regional pronunciations of *Negro* as *NIG-rah* and other variations, which came to symbolize the undercurrent of racial tensions in the South. Educated blacks, especially in the North, and especially after the Second World War, sought to establish *NEE-gro* as the polite form. McDavid and Leas, however, show that *NIG-rah* and other variants are, in fact, the polite forms in dialects and that they were not usually intended to slur or to connote the hated cognate. Yet, when whites, as a dominant group, finally understood that blacks preferred *NEE-gro*, but persisted in using traditional pronunciations, though faultlessly spelling them *Negro*, the resistance to change in this small matter was at least provocative and sometimes nothing more than thinly disguised hostility (Lipski 114).

Lipski also discusses the deliberate mispronunciation of *Arab*, a popular generic name for various Arab- or Arabic-American national groups. The pronunciation *AY-rab* is still heard among older, less educated Americans, perhaps only because, Lipski suggests, it recalls the long *a* of *Arabia*. But people who know better sometimes deliberately say *AY-rab* as a slur, and Americans of Arabic background generally find it offensive.

The pronunciation of *Italian* as *EYE-talian* is also dialect, but has been abused in a similar way. The phonetically-spelled print rendering, *Eyetalian* is old, dating at least to 1840, and was probably intended to mock the dialectal pronunciation. Today, the pronunciation also suggests to some the old slur *eyetie*, which was also popular during the First World War. To some persons not in the Southern speech community, the regional pronunciations of *Italian* may sound like a deliberate slur. The South and its speechways irrationally linger in the minds of some Americans as a singular locus of cultural bigotry and its expression. Jimmy Carter, during his first presidential campaign in 1976, was pressed to apologize publicly for pronouncing *Italian* as *EYE-talian*. The sounds came out of Carter's mouth naturally and without malice. Up North, Carter learned, *EYE-talian* is a fighting word, almost on the level with *wop*. This pronunciation and the variant *eye-TILE-ians* were common in old urban vaudeville routines,

which abounded in gross ethnic and other social stereotypes, humor, and derisive nicknames – and memories of cultural abuse are long.

Denial of Capital Initials

In standard English usage, the proper names of national and religious groups are written with a capital initial. The rule is occasionally taken as an honorific gesture that can be bestowed or denied at the pleasure of the writer or editor. To deny a capital letter to the name of an ethnic group symbolically diminishes the social status of the group in the speech community by the word magic of diminishing the initial letter. To deny, say, *Jew* the capital initial is clearly a slur and the device has been used in the hate literature. The user concedes the pronunciation and the spelling, but in print the dignity of the name is taken away. The business of denying a disliked ethnic group a big letter also occurs in other language communities with this convention of capitalization. Before the Second World War, for example, certain Polish writers refused to capitalize the initial of *Niemiec*, the Polish name for “German” (Roback 268).¹

The most famous case of non-capitalization in American English is certainly that of *Negro*. The name began its centuries-long career with a lower-case initial but after Reconstruction aspired to a capital initial. In the decades around 1900, *colored* competed with *negro* for the preferred, proper name for the group. *Afro-American* had been proposed in 1880, but it was not taken up, and it was to be eighty years or more before it was to gain a measure of use. Finally, *negro* emerged as the proper name preferred by many blacks and by white liberals. Settling on the name was not to be the end of it. Soon, a campaign began for capitalizing the initial, and the debate turned on ideology as much as anything. A side debate was over whether *negro* was a relative color descriptive, like *fair*, *dark*, or for that matter *black* and *white*, and hence had not claim on capitalization. Or was *negro*, in effect, a national name, like *Englishman*, *German*, or *Spaniard*, or a group name, like *Jew*, and so should be capitalized?

H.L. Mencken (379-82) recounts, not wholly approving, how black leaders and the black press urged the capitalization of *Negro* as a recognition of the dignity of black people and of their equality with other groups. Mencken cites the “irreverent” black columnist George Schuler, who argued in the 1930s and 1940s that capitalization would, in effect, harden the

stereotype of black people. Schuyler thought *negro* was a descriptive, not a group denomination. Nonetheless, the *New York Times* had in 1930 announced that it would capitalize *Negro*. Federal government publications followed in 1933. Other publications, depending on how liberal their inclinations, followed. Most of the nation's press had complied by the late 1940s. A few small Southern newspapers defiantly kept the lower-case initial well into the 1950s. The beginning of the Civil Rights Movement effectively marked an end to this petty dispute.

A few decades after this battle had been won, history repeated itself with a similar technical controversy about the capitalization of *black*. But new ideologies confounded the issue. After 1968 the name *Negro* quickly fell from favor among younger black people. For decades some politically-minded blacks had objected to the word *Negro*—with or without the capital initial—because of its associations with slavery and because it was an alien name of Spanish and Portuguese origin foisted upon blacks by whites. The emergence of the black pride movement and the militant and separatist turn of the Civil Rights Movement prompted a change of names in keeping with the new identity; it was to be *black*. The capitalization, or not, of *black* and, this time, too, of *white*, became once again a complicated game of ethnic discourse in miniature.

It did not seem to matter that *black* was one of the oldest names used by the slavers and that it was, often as not, used as an epithet down to the 1960s. Blacks recognized that they—blacks—and whites were, more than anything else, political camps, and the word *black* represented a one-to-one opposition to *white*. The names—each has one syllable and five letters—were polar opposites, and each word is laden with historical, even mystical symbolism. The white press and academic writers did not know how to respond, though some tried to follow the erratic lead of new, unsettled, still-emerging black usages. Earlier in the 1960s some had eagerly adopted *Afro-American*, then still less than common. Yet the U.S. Bureau of the Census in the count of 1970 offered black citizens the choice of identifying themselves as “Negro,” “Afro-American,” or “Black.” *Black* was soon accepted by the national press. The *New York Times* rode out the transition by alternating *black* and *Negro*, sometimes using *black* as an adjective but keeping *Negro* as a noun. Soon *black* came into general use and *Negro* was out. Now it was *black* and *white*—neat, simple, and symmetrical.

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The lower-case initial in *black* and *white* also seemed to take account of the idea that blacks and whites were not ethnic monoliths or “nationalities,” as much as traditionally estranged entities of some other sort. Then the old question of capitalization arose again, but with some new issues. Some academic writers and journalists, probably recalling the struggle to capitalize *Negro*, rushed to capitalize *black*, both as an adjective and as a noun. But this vanguard seemed to miss the political point of the forthrightness offered by an all lower-case *black*. Ironically, capitalizing the new name could detract from the new political idea it represented and make *Black* in this particular only a replacement for the rejected *Negro* and with no change of meaning. These writers and editors seemed to fear that the all lower-case *black* might be taken as mildly pejorative, like its pre-1930s predecessor *negro*. Or perhaps the capitalized *Black* was an effort to set the new name apart from the old *black*, a historical epithet.

At any rate many writers and editors in the late 1960s began using the capitalized *Black*, both as noun and adjective, while keeping the conventional lower-case *white*. This, to be sure, destroyed the symmetry of the two ideas. Did this, they must have wondered, make *Black* with a capital initial look like a sop? Or, from another perspective, did a big *B* towering over a little *w* hint of confrontation and “demands”? Some users settled down with the symmetrical forms *Black* and *white*, but never the reverse. Some took no chances and capitalized both, while others kept the lower-case initial for both. After two decades writers and editors have not yet arrived at consensus. Mostly, I see the symmetrical *black* and *white* used in what I read. Nonetheless, some journalists, academic writers, and editors who seem eager to display their sensitivity to racial matters use the upper-case *Black* and the lower-case *white*.

Prescription may have a certain logic and historical sense, but usage, for better or worse, will eventually carry the day. Yet popular and prevailing usages, as surely as imposed elite usages, reflect ideology—the manipulation of ideas and symbols for political goals. Whether both names are capitalized or not is a trivial matter, but capitalizing one name and not the other is a political gesture—ideology in typography. But at this level it is not always cogent. Capitalizing only *Black* can smack of indulgence when done by white writers and of, well, “signifying” when done by black writers.

It could be argued that both names are, or have become, proper nouns and so should be capitalized. On the other hand, can we not hope that black and white are, or should be, informal, temporary matters and that their opposition ought not be hardened symbolically with capital letters any more than it is? South African English usage, I gather from afar, seems to favor *Black* and *White* – both capitalized; in that social and political context it makes more sense to connote intractable relations. But in the American context the simplicity and symmetry of *black* and *white* avoids casting the names – symbolically opponents – into emblems.

But the whole issue of capitalization – and the discourse it symbolizes – may soon be turned aside if the noun and adjective *African-American* is successfully revived. The Rev. Jesse Jackson recently suggested that it is now time for American blacks to take the more fruitful identity and name of *African Americans*, to take their place alongside other American ethnic groups whose names refer to “some land base, some historical cultural base.” Early signs show some enthusiasm for the proposal. The new label would please many social scientists, for it would denote ethnicity over color and connote equality in pluralism.

Noncapitalization signifies the historical weakness of a minority group; the struggle for capitalization signifies the rising status of a historically oppressed group; and decapitalization has sometimes signified efforts to repress competing groups. We can also expect to see the final permutation: decapitalization to signify the declining status of a formerly dominant group. The so-called WASPs, the wonderfully pronounceable acronym for *White Anglo-Saxon Protestant(s)*, were high in the popular consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s. The coincidence of a group that both is in decline and has an acronym for a name offers an unusual opportunity for ethnic conflict to result in multiple and progressive decapitalization.

In pop sociology *WASPs* denotes the crowd supposedly most culpable for ethnic inequalities in the history of American life. This supposed “group,” actually a multiplicity of class, national-origin, and home-grown regional groups, was named around 1960, or just before, when up-and-coming groups perceived white Protestants as declining in social power and cultural influence – and on the run. The name is sometimes aimed chiefly at the privileged, established upper middle class, especially in the Northeast, but just as often it is used indiscriminately for any and all white Protestants – Anglo-Saxon or not.

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As the acronym *WASP* became widely used as a spoken as well as a spelled word, its original and acronymic meaning became hazy and half-forgotten.² An acronym is customarily spelled, at least at first, with all capital letters—*WASP*. But acronyms tend to slide first into a capitalized initial and finally into all lower case, like the descent from *RADAR*, to *Radar*, down to *radar*. Some journalists and editors wearied of the pretense that the epithet *WASP* was merely a denotative, neutral acronym and began to use *Wasp*. The *American Heritage Dictionary* in 1970 gave authority to this by listing *Wasp*, *WASP*, and *wasp*, in that order, which suggests that the all upper-case form was beginning to lose its grip. A few writers mischievously flirted with the all lower-case *wasp*, making it into a common noun and by connotation a perjorative. But in the 1980s I see a rehabilitation to a proper acronymic, all upper-case *WASP*, perhaps indicating an awareness of the pejorative suggestion in decapitalization and attempting to set a distance between the two meanings.

Department of Sociology
University of Connecticut

Notes

1. Etymologically and historically, noncapitalization is the least of the slur in *Niemiec*. In Polish and in Russian, the word for "German" is related to the word for one who is mute or dumb—*niemy* in Polish. In the early history of the region, the Slavic-speaking people regarded their Germanic-speaking neighbors to the west as barbarians whose language was incomprehensible and, so, figuratively they were mute or dumb.

2. William Safire in his political column in the *New York Times* more than once has felt it necessary, despite the redundancy of the idea of "white" already in the term (white and Anglo-Saxon), to remind his readers that "WASPS" are white. Describing the fiasco of a UN vote near the end of the Carter administration, Safire (March 6, 1980) wrote that Cyrus Vance was "white, Wasp ..." and several years later on August 23, 1984, he referred to "white WASP women." This also confirms my more general suspicion that *WASP* has become a euphemism, or perhaps a dysphemism, for *Protestant*.

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