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The Influence of English on Female Names in Brazil

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Abstract

First names given to Brazilian females between 1967 and 1987 show considerable influence of English. A descriptive analysis classifies the names and compares orthographic and phonological versions with names in English-speaking countries as well as those within the sample. Although English has had little effect on the Portuguese language, results demonstrate that its influence on the naming system is significant.

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The phenomenon of language spread, including the spread of English, has been widely documented (Fishman; Heath; Bailey and Görlach; Cooper). It is an axiom of human social interaction that when speakers of two or more languages "meet," either in the flesh or through the media of print, audio, or video, eventually one or more of the languages will begin to exercise some influence on the other(s). Robert L. Cooper defines language spread "as an increase, over time, in the proportion of a communication network that adopts a given language or language variety for a given communication function" (6). Cooper provides "A Checklist for the Study of Language Spread" which asks "a single summarizing question. . . : who adopts what, when, why, and how?" (31)

In this paper I examine decisions of parents in the city of Curitiba, Brazil, to give their newborn children first names of explicit or implicit English-language origin rather than choosing names from their own language, Portuguese. I studied a group of 47,058 birth certificates of children of both sexes registered during the twenty-one-year period 1967–1987 for evidences of borrowing and/or adoption. Findings show considerable influence of the English language—or at least parents' perceptions of the English language—in the choice of first and even middle names for their offspring.

It has been suggested that "post-modern parents" in nations of the developed world choose names which have little to do with cultural, religious, or family traditions, choosing instead names which are "signs

that stand for realities the namer wishes to associate with the baby"(Nau 14). Such orthonyms as *Mary, Elizabeth*, and *Margaret* were supplanted in the 1980's by *Jennifer, Tiffany*, and *Crystal* in the U.S. "top ten"; by *Sarah, Claire*, and *Kelly* in Great Britain (Dunkling and Gosling 304, 306); and by *Amanda, Jessica*, and *Melissa* in Canada (Nau 14). It is the thesis of this paper that Portuguese orthonyms have been and are being supplanted by English and English-influenced names.

Onomastic studies have shown that personal names are not merely labels; they focus "identity concerns," and are thus imbued with semantic content (Akinnaso 38). Philosophers of language such as Bertrand Russell see names as "signs without connotation"; others, however, qualify them as "meaning-bearing signs" that have "both sense and in most cases denotation" (Zabeeh 20, 24, 50). Sasha Weitman labels first names as a prime example of "poetic" communication, as "they manage to pack and to deliver rather considerable amounts of information in relatively few words" (193). Psychologists' studies of the impact first names have on personal identity and how people are treated by others conclude that "the name given a person influences the identity she/he develops" (Dion 245). Some researchers have suggested that certain names are determinants of perceived attractiveness and academic or financial success (Dickson 183; Lawson 58; Spitzer 16). Paul Tournier theorizes that names never come to parents' minds "as a result of chance. . . . [They] are bound up with irrational associations of ideas that are inconsequential and improbable at first sight" (72).

Political onomastics has dealt with naming and renaming in the contexts of colonization, revolution, and oppression of minorities. "Name changes can serve as indicators of broader social change, as devices for explaining or clarifying patterns of domination and submission" (Alia 34). To us, the concept that Brazil is being "colonized" by U.S. business concerns and media and shaped by American political and social values may seem absurd; from the perspective of many Brazilians, however, it is not, as both scholarly publications and the popular press reflect (Alves 9).

Brazil is a developing nation with widely disparate regional characteristics. Its southern region, however, is noted for its "developed-nation" features, such as high educational enrollment, literacy, and life expectancy combined with low mortality, fertility, and malnutrition rates (Knight 14; United Nations 16, 24). Foreign immigration played an important part in the nation's population growth: in 1800, a third of all

Brazilians were of European stock (Merrick 4). Figures for 1960, however, show that a mere 1.8% of the population was foreign-born; this had fallen to 1.3% in 1970 (Rowe 25, 40). The largest contingents of non-Portuguese foreigners have come from Japan, Italy, Spain, and Germany. These and other ethnic groups have been greatly assimilated into the general population, though there is still a strong identification with the country of origin and its culture and language by second-and even third-generation immigrants.

Curitiba, Brazil's ninth largest city with a 1985 population of 1,285,027 (Wilkie 107), has been labeled the nation's most livable urban area because of its excellent transportation system, low cost of living, and location in the southern agricultural state of Paraná, about 200 miles southwest of São Paulo. It experienced an important population increase between 1940 and 1970 as a result of internal migration (Merrick 5); the total overall growth rate for Paraná was 4.8% between 1960 and 1970 (Rowe 24). In addition to residents of Italian and German extraction, Polish and Ukrainian immigrant groups are firmly established in the city.

Data for this study were collected at Cartório Cajuru, a registry office located two blocks from a major hospital near the center of Curitiba. All births at hospitals are registered, but the only legal birth certificates are issued by *cartórios*. These official registry offices are technically part of the government bureaucracy, though owned by private citizens. A child may be registered at a *cartório* by one or both of the parents and three witnesses, during a period of forty-five days after birth. The parent need show no hospital certificate or personal identification to register the child's name or the names of his/her parents and grandparents. This information is transferred verbally from the parent(s) to a recording clerk; the parent will usually then check the register to see whether the name has been entered correctly, with desired spelling and diacritics. However, should the parent(s) and/or witnesses be illiterate, the clerk will enter the name as he/she sees best.

Clerks at a *cartório* may have on hand such volumes as *Onomástica Brasileira*, where they are warned, on pain of prosecution, "not to register first names which may expose their bearers to ridicule" (Federal Law 4.856, 1939). This has led many foreign immigrants, of their own free will or under duress, to give their children Portuguese first names (e.g., *Jõao Carlos Sakamoto*). Some *cartório* officials have actually decided that all non-Portuguese names fall into the "ridiculous" category, and have refused to register children under such conditions

(Bonilauri). This principle has been relaxed in recent years, as the results of this research will amply attest.

Cooper's last two questions, "how?" and "why?" have yet to be answered. In "coinage" of a foreign name (Stewart 68), there are often elaborate attempts to accent it, write it exactly as pronounced in the namer's native tongue, and then drop such conventions as the name becomes more common and socially acceptable. On the other hand, many names in the Curitiba data can best be described as pure imitation of English pronunciation and/or spelling. One *cartório* clerk asked me, "Have you seen my son's name? He was born in 1983. We gave him a real American name: *Brayan*." When asked why she had chosen that particular spelling, the clerk answered,

> We use *y*'s in the names if parents ask, because it's clear that if you want the name to look more American, you should use *y*, shouldn't you? After all, when you see credits for TV programs and films, everything's written with *y*! My husband loves anything and everything American, so he wanted our child to have the most American name possible.

Suffice it to say that the semivowel *y* is not part of the current Portuguese alphabet. Further answers to the questions "how?" and "why?" will become evident during the presentation of the data and subsequent conclusions.

I culled the names for the study from ninety-nine birth registers covering the period 1967–1987. The total sample of 47,058 names, though large, can still only be considered a "partial" source (Weitman 182); this cannot be seen as a major flaw, however, as the object of the research is not strictly quantitative. I applied certain "controls" to data collection: (a) only offspring of Brazilian-born parents were considered; and (b) if the name were clearly a copy or combination of wholes or parts of parents' or grandparents' first or middle names, it was disregarded.

Names regarded as English or English-influenced met the following criteria: (a) they were identical to given names in the English language in terms of spelling and pronunciation; (b) they were built upon productive prefixes or suffixes borrowed from current English given or family names; or (c) they used spellings based on the English rather than on the Portuguese alphabet. Names that were identical to those used in English but with a long history of use in Brazil were not considered (*Júlia, Laura, Patrícia*); Biblical names were not considered unless their spellings were

clearly English and differed considerably from the standard Portuguese version. English spellings were checked with such sources as Dunkling and Gosling, Kolatch, and Stewart; both English and Portuguese names were compared in the Immigration and Naturalization Service manual.

Of the 47,058 certificates I studied, 10,522 demonstrated some influence from the English language. Because of the wealth of data, I decided to concentrate on female names. As Paul Dickson correctly observes, "fashions in girls' names change more often than boys'" (121). Timothy Nau states that "there has always been much less tradition in the naming of girls than boys.... [A girl] might be named for anyone or anything, as long as the referent was reasonably pleasant" (7). I thus reduced the sample to a more workable 5,553 female names. In analyzing these data according to the criteria mentioned above, I noticed that certain tentative categories emerged:

(1) Names identical to English names (24%)
(2) English names with Portuguese spellings (17%)
(3) Names with prefixes and suffixes of English-language origin (49%)
(4) Portuguese names with pseudo-English spellings (2%)
(5) Other foreign names with pseudo-English spellings (3%)
(6) English names with pseudo-English spellings (5%)
(7) Classification unknown (less than 1%)

If each of these names were to be studied individually, the majority would fall into a category labeled "unique names," as they are low-frequency, occurring less than once in 500 (Lawson 46). As a group, however, they may be considered significant, as they constitute nearly one-fourth of the 47,058-name sample. Table 1 displays the six categories used in data analysis, together with characteristics and selected examples of names in each.

Category 1, consisting of names directly from English, includes those based on fictional and real-life heroines (*Diana* and its variants were big about the time of the royal wedding). It is even possible to find names such as *Rachel* competing with the very popular Portuguese *Raquel*. The category includes hypocoristic as well as "full" first names: *Gracie, Kate, Kathy, Sally, Sue*, and *Shelly*.

Category 2 names adhere to Portuguese spelling conventions: Table 1 examples demonstrate avoidance of *y* and *w*, simplification of double

Table 1. Characteristics and examples of English-influenced names.

Category	Characteristics	1967 Examples	1987 Examples
1	Identical to English	Elaine Kelly Rosemary	Caroline Sue Ellen Vanessa
2	English Names with Portuguese spelling	Deizi Elizabete Sirlei	Alison Jenifer Kathe
3	Hybridization: English prefixes and suffixes	Eliane Lucimari Sirlene	Dryelen Francyane Temilyn
4	Psuedo-English spelling of Portuguese names	*	Crystane Juliany Nathalie
5	Pseudo-English spelling of foreign names	*	Danielly Jakeline Thatiana
6	Pseudo-English spelling of English names	*	Hellen Keitthy Sheyla

*No names in categories 4, 5, or 6 appeared in 1967 data.

consonants, realization of English sequences *sh* and *th* by their nearest Portuguese equivalents, and writing the long English vowel *a* as *ei*. Other conventions are the use of acute and circumflex accents and the cedilla (*ç*) and non-differentiation of final *m* and *n*. Application of the rules is inconsistent: a name might be accented to show English stress but include the non-Portuguese consonant *y* (*Méllany*).

When analyzing Category 3 names, it is difficult to verify if one is dealing with prefix + root, or root + suffix; in such hybrids, there may not be a root-affix opposition in any case. The hybridization of names in English is not a particularly new phenomenon; it probably originated with the desire of parents or grandparents to preserve parts of several names in one (Kolatch xxv). "Prefixes" used in Category 3 names include those found in Table 1, as well as their variants. Other common prefixes are *Jos-*, *Ros-*, and *Sus-*; suffixes are even more variable, as attested by *-lyn/-lene/-lane/-laine/-layne* or *-lei/-ley/-li/-ly*.

Pseudo-English spellings characterize Category 4 names. In these particular data, no Portuguese names with English spellings appear before 1970, and the majority appear only after 1980. Substitution of *y* for *i* and the use of *w, k,* and *ph* or *th* sequences seem to be an extension of the post-1950 American trend to write conventional names in unconventional ways (Kolatch xxviii). In the case of these data, however, the innovation introduced is an English-inspired expansion of the Portuguese alphabet.

Foreign names with pseudo-English spellings begin to appear in the data in the late 1970s and early '80s. The names chosen are largely French and obey the same conventions as Category 4.

Category 6 names are of particular interest, as they appear to be examples of English spelling gone overboard. Among such data, it is not unusual to find first name/middle name combinations such as *Kellie Cristhina, Kharin Elizabeth*, or *Mellani Cristine*, in which a Category 6 name is paired with those from the same or other categories.

The quantitative indicator used in dealing with the data varied according to the purpose of the comparison. I found simple frequency count useful in determining the number of different names per year. But to track the popularity of English-influenced names and the six categories, I used proportions, which lend themselves to arithmetic operations, and rank ordering, because it "is the most appropriate index for tracing changes in the popularity of individual names" (Weitman 192).

The data show an average increase in the number of different names per year, including English-influenced names, in the sample total: 381 in 1967, 556 in 1977, and 411 in 1987. Simple frequency counts, however, cannot adequately show the popularity of a particular name; an alternate analysis shows that the proportion of different names when compared with the total sample increased from 26% to 35% during the same twenty-one years. An increase in the percentage of distinct items in a name pool may reflect diversification and/or borrowing from outside sources.

The results of such qualitative expansion of the name pool are some fluctuation in the total percentage of English-influenced names and increasing diversification of the female sample. The average percentage of English-influenced items was 23%, varying from a high of 29% in 1968 to a low of 16% a year later. The breakdown of the female sample into the six categories shows that "real" English names in Category 1 peaked in the early 80s and declined slowly to near-1967 levels by the end of the decade. Categories 2 and 3 (English names with Portuguese spellings and names

with English affixes) reached their highest levels in the early '70s. Categories 4 and 5, consisting of Portuguese and foreign names with Anglicized spellings, registered overall increases during the twenty-one years, and Category 6, English names with pseudo-English spellings, increased consistently, finishing the period at three times its 1967 proportion. It is interesting to note that male names in the sample followed similar trends. This may represent a certain "cultural fatigue" with English and English-influenced names by the end of the '80s; the only tendency that persisted was that of making English names more English still.

Rank ordering produces clearer results than either frequency counts or proportion analysis in tracking the popularity of particular names in the six categories from year to year. Table 2 ranks the names in the sample according to both orthographic and phonological forms.

Spelling variants are common, and for the orthographic analysis I classified all of the variants, the different spellings of *Diane* for example, as different names. In the context of this research, this system makes

Table 2. First place orthographic/phonological names with category designations.

Year	Orthographic	Phonological
1967	Eliane (3)	Eliane (3)
1968	Eliane (3)	Eliane (3)
1969	Eliane (3)	Elisabete (2)
1970	Luciane (3)	Cristiane, Luciane (3)
1971	Luciane (3)	Luciane (3)
1972	Cristiane (3)	Cristiane (3)
1973	Cristiane, Luciane (3)	Cristiane (3)
1974	Luciane (3)	Luciane (3)
1975	Cristiane (3)	Cristiane (3)
1976	Cristiane (3)	Cristiane (3)
1977	Vanessa (1)	Vanessa (1)
1978	Cristiane (3)	Cristiane (3)
1979	Vanessa (1)	Vanessa (1)
1980	Vanessa (1)	Vanessa (1)
1981	Caroline (1)	Cristiane (3)
1982	Vanessa (1)	Vanessa (1)
1983	Vanessa (1)	Vanessa (1)
1984	Kelly, Vanessa (1)	Kelly, Vanessa (1)
1985	Vanessa (1)	Vanessa (1)
1986	Vanessa (1)	Vanessa (1)
1987	Vanessa (1)	Vanessa (1)

sense, since spelling aloud and writing are central to registration of a new citizen. On the other hand, a phonological analysis of each name is also productive, as it points out the import of such orthographic variation. *Diane* can yield such spellings as *Dayane, Dayanne, Daiane*, and *Dianny* (Category 6). There is a phonological unity among the orthographic variants: the pronunciation [die-AHN-ee]. In this second ranking, therefore, all the names listed above would be considered variants of *Diane*, if that, in fact, were the most frequently-occurring form.

In the orthographic analysis, Category 3 was ranked first in popularity eleven times, or 52% of the years; Category 1 came in first ten times, or 45% of the twenty-one years. Category 3 ranked first in the phonological analysis as well, ten times; Category 1 followed with nine appearances. Category 2 appeared in first position twice. Table 2 shows the distribution of orthographic and phonological names and their categories which ranked first year by year.

It is also interesting to compare the "top ten" names across ten-year intervals (1967–1977–1987), both in terms of the names themselves and the categories they represent. To qualify for ranking, a name must have appeared at least five times during the course of a particular year. Table 3 demonstrates the greater frequency of Category 1 names (identical to English) over the twenty-one-year period, as well as the gradual inclusion of Category 6 items (English names with pseudo-English spellings).

A comparison of the phonological lists, in particular, with the top ten rankings of female names for New York City in 1982 (Dickson 121) shows few similarities. It is interesting to note, however, that by 1987 all ten of the American names appear in the Curitiba data, in one orthographic form or another: *Jennifer* (1983); *Elizabeth* (1967); *Michelle* (1971); and *Stephanie* (1983) are examples. Edmondson's list of 1986 "yuppie" babies (13), which includes *Elizabeth, Sarah, Amanda, Samantha*, and *Kate*, finds some parallels in the Curitiba list for that year. The Canadian Registrar-General's list for 1985 (Nau 8) has *Melissa, Stephanie*, and *Nicole* in the top ten; *Vanessa* appears further down. With the exception of *Megan*, all top ten Canadian names appear in the Brazilian data for that year. Dickson points out that when associated with celebrities, infrequent or unpopular names such as *Elizabeth, Crystal, Samantha*, and *Tiffany* may see sudden surges in popularity. This is very much the case with the names in this study; the influence of American television characters is especially notable. Despite Brazil's own thriving television industry, dubbed American programs are frequent fare, and characters' names are left untouched by translation.

Table 3. Top ten phonological names, 1967-1977-1987.

Rank	1967	1977	1987
1	Eliane (3)	Vanessa (1)	Vanessa (1)
2	Elizabeth (1) Roseli (7)	Luciane (3)	Tatiane (3)
3	Marilene (2) Luciane (3)	Cristiane (3)	Suellen (6)
4	Rosane (3)	Eliane (3) Viviane (3)	Viviane (3)
5	Jane (1) Cristiane (3) Josiane (3)	Elaine (1) Elizabete (2)	Cristiane (3)
6	Roseane (3)	Kelly (1) Rosemary (1)	Elaine (1)
7	*	Caroline (1) Sheila (1) Adriane (3)	Caroline (1) Dayane (6)
8	*	Michelle (1) Josiane (3) Regiane (3)	Kelly (1)
9	*	Lilian (2) Melissa (1)	Francine (1) Grace (1)
10	*	*	Daiana (2) Jéssica (2)

*Appeared fewer than five times in that year.

A 1988 study of naming behavior in Puerto Rico points out that even though "the effect of English on Puerto Rican Spanish has been minimal," the effect of English on the naming system has been much stronger (Fayer 22). In Brazil, the increasing use of English in professional life coupled with its omnipresence in the media and other forms of popular culture has given rise to a proliferation of names which either are English or look and sound like English.

Further research which could be done with this sample includes following up on an impression gained through superficial examination of

the data that children registered as "illegitimate" more often than not received Category 1 names. Should this observation prove true, it may demonstrate that use of English-influenced names by poorer parents is a form of social climbing for themselves and their children. Another tack the research might take would be the administration of a questionnaire to "the man in the street" to gauge perceptions of the survey names as "English-influenced."

The imitation and creativity of the naming depicted in this study show a great deal about "the people who select them to identify their children" (Weitman 181). The "cultural decoding" of this research may predict an augmentation and differentiation of the name pool and greater influence of English-speaking cultures in Brazil.

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