

Anglicizing Ethnic Surnames

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After arriving in the United States, many immigrants “anglicized” their names. This essay merges the scholarship on this process of “anglicization.” We begin with dissecting the ubiquitous Ellis Island stories, highlight the work of early lexicographers, then end with the excellent collection of essays in Patrick Hanks’s *Dictionary of American Family Names*. We end by explaining two decades of research among gravemarker scholars - suggesting a possible merging of lexicography with the Universal Discourse of Mourning.

For several reasons, the term *Anglicizing Theory* is used in this essay instead of, perhaps, *Anglicizing Procedure* or *Anglicizing Process*. First, scholars (as we shall see below) have yet to agree on technical terminology. *Clerks* vie with *officials*; *truncation* with *shortening*; *transmuting* with *transliteration*; *substitution* with *equivalence*; *orthography* with *spelling* with *sounds-like*; *reverting-to-patronym* vies with *returning-to-Hebrew*. Even the single term *Anglicizing* is hidden behind the term *Germanizing* at one point.

Second, the term *Anglicizing Theory* is used because so far, at least, *Anglicizing* appears to be subsumed under concepts closely allied with *Assimilation Theory* - which has a long and respected usage among culture scholars. Yet Cultural Assimilation Theory has relegated language assimilation into an, as-yet, under-explored topic.

Finally, *Anglicizing Theory* is used because in cemeteries an entirely unexpected, universal, discourse of mourning predicts the order in which particular semantic items on gravemarkers become anglicized. In other words, a linguistic universal - the Universal Discourse of Mourning - appears to

play a biological role in the anglicizing process.

Anglicizing Theory: Ellis Island Stories

Ellis Island—and stories emanating from that federal immigration processing center—has dominated American understanding of early immigration procedure. Most of our cultural Ellis Island stories focus upon surnames, especially upon ways in which surnames become anglicized.

We know, however, “remarkably little” beyond cultural anecdotes. Daniel Levine, Kenneth Hill, and Robert Warren, for example, state in the preface to their seminal collection of essays in *Immigration Statistics: A Story of Neglect*:

As a nation built by waves of immigrants from colonial times to the present, we know remarkably little about the composition and characteristics of the flow of new arrivals in any given year or about how they settle in to their new lives in the United States (1985, 2).

Nonetheless, most of us have vague ideas about the registration process itself; most of those ideas do jell with reality.

Basically, when ships of immigrants arrived in New York harbor, the immigrants underwent a screening process. Smaller boats or barges brought the immigrants and their baggage to Ellis Island, technically a barge itself. At Ellis Island the immigrants underwent an exhaustive three-part (medical, psychological, economic) examination. According to the first major Ellis Island historian, Henry Pratt Fairchild, “If the immigrant appears to be ‘clearly and beyond a doubt’ entitled to admission, he passes on to the disharboring quarters, where he is turned over to the agents of the appropriate transportation company, or to a ‘missionary,’ or is set free to take his way to the city by the ferry” (1930, 188).

This immigration process, however, occurred before national registration of any type. The actual process amounted to little more than verification of a cargo manifest - and of the

health of that “cargo.” Names that people were given at Ellis Island had little, if any, legal status.

One should not totally dismiss the reality of the Ellis Island stories—nor the equivalent Baltimore, Boston, Philadelphia, Galveston ones. Certain individuals did indeed suffer from xenophobia in these processing centers. Historian August Bolino writes quite succinctly:

“In the process of inspection, many a future American ‘suffered’ a name change. Today we can laugh at these instances, but they must have perplexed the aliens, who found themselves addressed in a fashion [by whom, he does not say] they did not recognize” (1985, 17).

Bolino duplicates two of Maldwyn Jones’ examples. One tells of the frustrated Jew who, when asked his name, said “Ich vergessen” [I forget]; he was named “Ferguson.” The second story tells of an Italian man who said that his name was Mastroianni, and he became Mister Yanni” (15).

To broaden our understanding of the Ellis Island experience, Jewish scholar Bernard Marinbach reminds us that similar cargo manifest verification took place in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Boston, and Galveston.

The Ellis Island center has gained so much attention that, for most of us, these additional four locations seem lost in our understanding of immigration history. Even for Texas, the importance of that Galveston center appears almost incidental. Marinbach’s Jewish “community,” for example, has certainly not dominated Texas folklore. Yet “Between the years 1907 and 1914,” Marinbach writes, “about ten thousand Jews were admitted as immigrants at Galveston, settling in virtually every state of the West” (Marinbach, xiii).

This broadened geographical scope (New York, Baltimore, Boston, Philadelphia, and Galveston) certainly helps us understand our over-reliance upon the insights warped by Ellis Island cultural mythology.

We must, however, understand that accepting such

Ellis Island stories interferes with our cultural understanding of ways in which the majority of family names actually became anglicized. These stories have provided our culture a red herring - effectively cutting off our understanding of the obvious methods used by second and third generation families to change their surnames.

Anglicizing Theory: 1970-1989

Serious research on anglicizing immigrant surnames was published by Smith and Smith in 1974. The first of their three anglicizing procedures indeed repeats the non-specific, unnamed "American officials." The Smiths discuss at length atrocious name changes that eighteenth century German immigrants suffered, even before the presence of Ellis Island. For example, "Whenever there was an obvious near-equivalent in English to the German surname, American officials [in general, not Ellis Island] were likely to use it with or without permission of the bearer; thus, *Schmid-Schmidt-Schmitz* usually was recorded as *Smith*, *Müller-Möller* became *Miller*, *Braun* became *Brown*" (100).

Smith and Smith address a second, more substantial procedure for surname changes: gradual acquiescence of the family. Wherever there was a translatable equivalent for a German surname, some family members were likely sooner or later to adopt it, usually in the third generation and thereafter; thus, *Zimmermann* became *Carpenter*, *Schneider* became *Taylor*, *Dürr* became *Dry*, *Gerber* became *Tanner*, *Bauer* became *Farmer*" (100).

And thirdly, Smith and Smith discuss spelling difficulties. "Wherever American pronunciation was confounded by German orthography, the German surname was likely to be changed in such manner as to preserve the original German pronunciation of it; thus *Ewald* became *Awalt*, *Dreier* became *Dryer*, *Meier-Maier* became *Myer*, *Koch* became *Cook*, *Bauer* became *Bower*"(100). While giving us a serious step toward our understanding of the immigration anglicizing

process, Smith and Smith's explanation does not differentiate between process two (acquiescence), which accounts for *Bauer* anglicizing into *Farmer*, and process three (orthography), which accounts for the same *Bauer* anglicizing into *Bower*.

While moving away from the "dangerous clerks" explanation, Smith and Smith seem to suggest that neither "officials" nor "acquiescence" is needed for the orthography changes. They just happen.

In reality orthography presented major problems, not only to immigrants but to "government officials."

In many European, non-English languages, the various Roman alphabets that people use contain numerous diacritics. Most of our computers today contain "symbol inserts" that allow the free use of such diacritics. The letter *i* for example may have the additional diacritics *ì, í, î, or ï*.

Historically, though, part of the cultural identity attached to written English was the avoidance of such diacritics. In his first book on American surnames, E. Smith minced no words:

In this book the diacritical marks of the various languages are disregarded because they are not customarily used in American family names. A true "American" name does not have an accent, a tilde, an umlaut, a circumflex, a cedilla or any of the numerous other signs of marks used in the various languages. Americans just refuse to take the time to add such marks, and the foreigner soon ceases to insist upon it and he, himself, ignores the diacritical mark" (1956, xxxi).

In the second edition of this same book, Smith toned down the rhetoric somewhat, but not his belligerence:

Names are given with the spelling usually employed in America even though slightly different from the form found in the country of origin. Indeed, the spelling commonly employed in America may not be found at all in the country of origin. This book is about American names and not about names current in other countries. . . . Names are spelled as

they are commonly used in America influenced by the English language without those diacritical marks so sacred to many from other countries." (1973, xxxi).

In 1989 Hanks and Hodges published their oft cited dictionary of surnames *A Dictionary of Surnames*.¹ While mentioning Anglicization in America through "alteration by personal choice," most American name changes are due to "involuntary official change, in other words, clerical error" (viii). They back their contention by citing H. L. Mencken's *The American Language*: "In North America, the linguistic problems confronting the immigration officials at Ellis Island in the 19th century were legendary as a prolific official source of Anglicization (viii)." (They cite Mencken, in spite of an accurate caveat ". . . it is not always possible to check his sources, which are mostly anecdotal" (ix).

"Eventually," Hanks and Hodges write, "it was decided that it would be more useful to explain surnames [in *A Dictionary of Surnames*] in their original, European forms than to concentrate on the Anglicizations to which they have given rise" (vi).

In their discussion of languages written in non-Roman scripts, moreover, Hanks and Hodges address the overall difficulty of "transmuting" any language into English.

Reluctantly, it was decided not to attempt to deal with the comparatively recent advent of surnames derived from other naming traditions--in particular, those of India, Pakistan, China, and Japan - even though such names are found with ever-increasing frequency in English-speaking countries. Perhaps in a future edition it will be possible to tackle these names too, and show how different systems of nomenclature from different cultures have been transmuted into 20th century surnames (vi).

Anglicizing Theory: Hanks 2003

In 2003, fourteen years after his work on (mostly) Surnames in England, Patrick Hanks edited and published the

Dictionary of American Family Names. Hanks has included much new information on the anglicizing process in this publication. Specifically he has included 67 pages of scholarly discussion on the naming customs for more than two dozen language families. (Twenty-six scholars are included in the discussion - mostly scholars who are familiar to those of us working with ethnic languages in America.) Relevantly, two of the scholars, Nick Nicholas (lxxv) and Alexander Beider (lxxix), emphatically state that the Ellis Island stories amount to more myth than substance.

As to actual anglicizing procedures, Kay Muhr discusses three applications to Irish and Gaelic Family names: Transliteration (converting to English orthography), Translation (*Mac Conaonaigh* to either *rabbit* or *bird*), Equivalents (*MacFergus* to *Ferguson*) (xl-xli).

Susan Whitebooks blames the clerks for changing Canadian French to Northeastern (U.S.?) English orthography: "For the early migrants coming south from Canada, the names were recorded as they sounded to clerks and were written in conformance with English spelling usage" (xlviii); Edda Gentry recognizes the same three procedures for German as Muhr found for Gaelic: orthography, substitution (equivalence), and Translation (CAP?) (liv-lv); Charles Gehring blames Dutch changes on those ubiquitous "clerks": ". . . many Dutch family names are now disguised owing to the spelling conventions applied by English-speaking clerks" (lvii); Olav Veka, in addition to the expected orthographic changes for Scandinavian names, introduces a new concept - the decision to choose "farmstead" names instead of patronymic (*Haugen* 'from the mound' instead of, say, *Olsen*); for Finnish, Hannele Jönsson-Korhola, in addition to orthographic and translation, recognizes the use of shortening (*Aho* from *Ahonen*), reversion to a patronymic (*Suutari* to *Antonson*), and "total change to an unrelated term (*Kannisto* to *Hill*).

Dieter Kremer and Roser Saurí Colomer introduce a huge problem for Iberian names - differences between those

names “imported via direct immigration from Europe and those that came as a result of migration within the Americas [and language sources in the Philippines]” (lxvii); Enzo Caffarelli argues that only recently have orthographic considerations influenced Italian surnames.

When orthographies move outside the roman alphabet, Nick Nicholas cites both shortening (using only occupational prefixes, reduction of inflectional endings, and reducing patronymic suffixes) and adopting “similar-sounding English surnames (*Athanasopoulos* to *Athanas* or *Athan*) for Greek (lxxv); Alexander Beider cites four procedures for Jewish names: phonetic adaptation, truncation, translation, rejection of [Slavic] suffixes, “Germanizing,” choosing unrelated names (*Cohen*), and, more recently, choosing Hebrew names (*Yosef*, *Ben Abraham*, *Sharon*) (lxxix-lxxx); Beider also wrote the Eastern Slavic article, citing truncation - sometimes accompanied by Anglicization (*Grushko* to *Grey*) (lxxxix); Simon Lenarčič states that Slovenian endings were often dropped and that similarly sounding English names were adopted (*Collins* for *Kolenc*).

Names for Southern India pose a new problem, according to Rocky Miranda: these Indians have no surnames in reality. Instead they use Personal Name + Father’s Personal Name--thus changing *Joseph* into a surname in the case of, say, *Krishna Joseph*. Orthographic changes also occur: *Behl* for *Bahl*, or *Tripathi* for *Tiwari*, (xcviii).

Excellent discussions of Asian languages finish the scholarly explanations. Mark Lewellen says that he chose, in the dictionary, to use the *pinyin* transliteration not only for Mandarin (where *pinyin* is the accepted standard) but for American Chinese names (cii). Frederick Brady confronts the lack of a standard transliteration system for Japanese - concentrating on the resultant confusion for the name *Itō*, which has seven different Chinese characters in Japanese (cv). Only Gary Mackelprang addresses the name reversal that exists in Korean, Chinese, and Japanese - all languages where

the cultures write the surname first. Mackelprang also interestingly asserts that “within a generation or two of having immigrated to North America, most Korean families adopt Western given names” (cvii).

Aleksandra Cieřlikowa gives no details of linguistic procedure but does state “The degree to which Polish names have become Americanized depends to some extent on the length of residence in the United States, as well as on the national consciousness of Poles residing there” (lxxxiii).

Anglicizing Theory: Lexicography Summation

Lexicographers working on Anglicizing Theory, thus far, appear to have two foci: linguistic change and human intervention.

Linguistic change involves various orthographic adjustments, translation, truncation, semantic shift (i.e. patronymic to farmstead), unrelated change, and various combinations of the above.

Human intervention appears to rely upon English-speaking clerks, upon family acquiescence, upon the length of stay within the English-speaking culture, and upon ethnic culture identity.

Cemeteries: Museums Of The Anglicizing Process

Throughout various cultures and within the various languages observed in Texas (and a compelling number of non-Texas) cemeteries, a core discourse of mourning binds together about ninety-percent of the families (Baird 1991, 1996, 2003; Eckert 1993, 1994, 1998).² On gravemarkers, families - using the language codes that they and their community use for everyday discourse - reveal the names of the deceased, their dates of death, their ages at death, family relationships, and perhaps a personal epitaph. [Surviving family members almost always author gravemarkers; seldom does one find gravemarkers written in first person voice.]

This core set of information is presented in a consistent,

predictable order of importance. If only one of the five items appears, that item will be the name. If two items, they will be the name and death date. If three items: name, death date, birth date; four: name, death date, birth date, kinship terminology; five: name, death date, birth date, kinship terminology, and personalized epitaph.

Note in *Figure 1, Salinas, English Language* the name, *Micaela Salinas*, the death date, *May 27, 1946*, the birth date, *July 6, 1903*, and the kinship terminology incorporated within the personalized epitaph, *in memory of our dear father*.



Figure 1: Salinas, English Language

MICAELA
SALINAS
JULY 6, 1903
MAY 27, 1946

IN MEMORY OF OUR DEAR MOTHER

Gravemarker messages also include places of birth and of death, means of death, occupations, lodge and/or religious affiliations, and stylized epitaphs. These pieces of information, however, produce no pattern statistically valid enough to be considered part of the universal discourse of mourning.

Note in *Figure 2, Martinez, English Language* that the Universal Discourse of Mourning includes all five of the core semantic bits: Name, death date, birth date, kinship terminology, and personalized epitaph. In addition, however, the marker has a stylized epitaph (Precious Memories).



Figure 2: Martinez, English Language

MARTINEZ		
DAUGHTER MOTHER		
MARIA	LIBRADA S.	
APR. 18, 1910	PRECIOUS	AUG. 17, 1882
APR. 1, 1944	MEMORIES	APR. 1, 1944
WITH LOVE FROM THE FAMILY		

The Martinez family in *Figure 3: Martinez, Spanish Language*, shares the same surname as the Martinez family in *Figure 2*. The two families, however, are not related. Note that the core Discourse of Mourning appears in the Spanish language code: names *Martinez, Eleno* and *Juana*; death dates *Agosto 21, 1947* and *Oct. 3, 1944*; birth dates (in this case, age at death) *edad 80 años* and *edad 66 años*; kinship terms *padre* and

madre; and personalized epitaph *recuerdo de sus hijos*. The cross in the middle of the marker signifies religious affiliation. 'father Eleno Martinez, died August 21, 1947 at the age of 80; mother Juana Martinez, died October 3, 1944 at the age of 66; in remembrance by their children.'



Figure 3: Martinez, Spanish Language

PADRE	MADRE
ELENO	JUANA
FALLECIO	FALLICIO
AGOSTO 21, 1947	OCT. 3, 1944
EDAD 80 AÑOS	EDAD 66 AÑOS
RECUERDO DE SUS HIJOS	
MARTINEZ	

Mixed Codes As Linguistic Entities

Gravemarker data, however, include one major linguistic aberration to the conventional division into recognizable languages. Specifically a significant number of the gravemarkers contain either *bilingual* or *mixed code* messages.

A *bilingual* marker repeats all or parts of the semantic information in two different languages. In *Figure 4: Furukawa bilingual Japanese and English*, for example, the name is duplicated in Japanese, in Japanese order: surname first (on top) 古川 [*Furukawa* ‘Old River’] followed by the given name 澄雄 [*Sumio* ‘Serene Male’]. (*Henry* apparently became his “American” name.)



Figure 4: Furukawa Bilingual Japanese and English

古
川
澄
雄

HENRY SUMIO
FURUKAWA
AUG. 2, 1889
NOV. 21, 1940

A *mixed code* marker, in contrast, uses two languages, but duplicates no information. In Figure 5: De La Cruz Mixed Code Spanish and English (Italics), *Juanita* shares a gravemarker with her parents, *Jesus* and *Micaela*. *Juanita*'s inscription, written entirely in Spanish, presents (as predicted by the Universal Discourse of Mourning) name, death date,³ birth date, and a personalized epitaph that incorporates her kinship: 'Juanita, March 8, 1927 – Sept. 1, 1945, in Remembrance by her parents and brothers.' Her parents'



Figure 5: De La Cruz Mixed Code Spanish–English

DE LA CRUZ	
JUANITA	
MARZO 8, 1927 – SEPT. 1, 1945	
RECUERDO DE SUS PADRES Y HERMANOS	
FATHER	MOTHER
JESUS A.	MICAELA D.
APRIL 3, 1906	SEPT. 29, 1909
JAN. 31, 1990	JUN. 18, 1996

inscriptions, on the other hand, are written entirely in English. Forty-five years passed since Juanita's death and her father's—enough time for the brothers (we assume) to feel comfortable mourning in English. This *mixed-code* pattern is also a universal; see, for example, the discussion of Greek, in the essay by Parakevas, in this issue of *NAMES*.

The importance of such bilingual and mixed-code, for an understanding of the anglicizing process, lies with an established linguistic concept known as the language *continuum*.

In 1966, linguist David Decamp published an article on Jamaican Creole in which he argued that a clear distinction between pure "dialect" [Creole] and pure "Standard British English" could not be found:

Nearly all speakers of English in Jamaica could be arranged in a sort of linguistic continuum, ranging from the speech of the most backward peasant or labourer all the way to that of a well educated urban professional. Each speaker represents not a single point but a span of this continuum, for he is usually able to adjust his speech upward or downwards for some distance on it. (66).

Later clarified with mathematical concepts, Decamp's concept of the continuum has become a working hypothesis in "Creole" studies (1971).

During the past several decades, the study of bilingual and mixed-language codes has become as important to linguists as has the study of monolingual codes. Justification for that importance lies in the search for linguistic universals - common structures that unite all languages.

Mixed codes are isolated for study in the above mentioned discipline known as Creole studies. Creole scholars study the manner(s) in which bilingual codes (Creoles), especially new and temporary bilingual codes, relate to established language codes; how the three language codes change through time; and how, through time, bilingual codes either tend to merge into one of the established codes, or grow

into separate and unique *languages* (Reinecke 1938; Lowie 1945; Weinreich 1953; Howell and Vetter 1976; Rickford 1987; Gilbert 1987; Tomason & Kaufmann 1988; and *Journal of Pidgin & Creole Languages* 1986-present).

Applying the continuum concept to gravemarker languages in any bilingual community requires only minor adjustment. Each gravemarker can, for starters, be a definite point on a continuum - not a "span on the continuum." The same family members ("each speaker") may be involved in the creation of several gravemarkers (or several inscriptions on a single gravemarker) and those gravemarkers may differ on a linear scale (one marker may have monolingual Spanish writing conventions, a second marker a mixture of Spanish and English, and a third marker only English) but each gravemarker is a unique point on the continuum.

Anglicizing Theory: Universal Discourse Of Mourning

In 1982, Annelise Duncan and I argued that Texas-German gravemarkers ranged from conventional German language codes to conventional English language codes—with a multitude of mixtures of the two codes (Baird & Duncan). We argued that the mixture may be as simple as using a comma instead of a period in the writing of a death date. (German conventions call for a "period"; English conventions call for a "comma.")

We also suggested that families subconsciously employ the linguistic pattern of the Universal Discourse of Mourning exists - even in the process of anglicizing the German code.

In fact, one may easily argue that no movement really takes place. Gravemarker Mourning is Gravemarker Mourning. Whether a family mourns in German or in English or in a mixture of German and English, the family mourns. Within a single cemetery though, the bilingual and mixed-code gravemarkers mark only a "point on the continuum."

Texas cemeteries abound in gravemarkers expressing "mourning" in a variety of bilingual and mixed language

codes: English/German, English/Czech, English/Polish, English/Spanish, English/Italian, English/French, English/Chinese, English/Arabic, among others.

Without having to duplicate already published data, the bilingual Furukawa marker (Figure 4) illustrates that the Japanese name, birth date, and death date have anglicized; the De La Cruz marker, (Figure 5) illustrates that names, death dates, birth dates, and kinship terms have anglicized from Spanish into English.

To summarize the arguments and examples: In ninety percent of more than a thousand researched monolingual, bilingual, and mixed-code gravemarkers (plus thousands more, verified by fellow scholars in the Association of Gravemarker Society, over two decades) anglicizing of surnames constitutes only the first of five predictable semantic items.

Sometimes, after a day of cemetery research, a glance around can give the plethora of gravemarkers the metaphoric image of silent filters. Below the filters lie people who have left life. Nothing stays behind. The filters, however, stop the burial of essential details: names, death dates, ages at death, family ties, a line or two that tell passers-by something special about that person. Sometimes, but in unpredictable patterns, other information also sticks to those markers – information such as occupation, birth place, death place, lodge affiliation, etc.

Most important, however, the marker almost always denies the burial of *names*.

Notes

1. Every summer for the past twenty years, Fred Tarpley and I have supervised a booth, *The Origin of Family Names*, during the four days of the Texas Folklife Festival. Every year, researchers have processed about three thousand requests from visitors to the Festival. After the availability of Hanks and Hodges' dictionary in 1990, the book has become the most reliable single source of information. (We use over thirty reference books, mostly from the constantly-updated Trinity University library collection.) In our case

alone, "oft-cited" means close to 100,000 usages, over fifteen years. Kelsie Harder has an insightful review of the dictionary, written in the year of the dictionary's publication (1989).

2. In previous publications, the Universal Discourse of Mourning has been referred to as the Universal Discourse of Grief. Recently, however, research has shown that psychologists and sociologists have relegated the term *grief* to "private" expressions of sorrow; the term *mourning* refers to "public" expressions of sorrow (Baird 2005).
3. *SEPT* is the abbreviation for Spanish *Septiembre*.

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